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Art

- Spring Art Preview

By Andrea K. Scott

In 1971, the feminist art historian Linda Nochlin challenged centuries of chauvinism with a groundbreaking essay titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin, who died in 2017, would have been gratified by the lineup at New York City's museums this spring, as women take center stage.

In **"Sarah Sze: Timelapse,"** the Guggenheim presents a series of site-specific installations by the brilliant American artist, who calibrates countless elements (found, sculpted, painted, video-based, printed, sonic, drawn, and architectural) into intricate works that seem to unfold as viewers discover them. The always cosmic dimension of Sze's art assumes epic proportions via a live feed of the moon, cycling through its phases, projected onto the curved façade of the museum's Frank Lloyd Wright-designed building. (Opens March 31.)

The British-born, New York-based painter Cecily Brown shares Sze's knack for making works that feel at once definitive and in progress. For three decades, Brown has steeped herself in the canon of Western painting (Rubens, Picasso, de Kooning), while also pushing her medium forward, in gestural canvases of ruthless beauty which hover between abstraction and figuration. The Met assembles fifty examples in **"Cecily Brown: Death and the Maid."** (Opens April 4.)

The achievements of the American modernist Georgia O'Keeffe, like those of Frida Kahlo, are too often obscured by the cult of her personality and its attendant merch. (Dress paper dolls in miniature O'Keeffe outfits; wear a life-size replica of her denim shirt.) The first woman to have had a retrospective at *moma*, in 1946, returns to the museum in **"Georgia O'Keeffe: To See Takes Time."** The focus is on a lesser-known aspect of the artist's œuvre: her passion for working in series, using charcoal, watercolor, and pastel. (Opens April 9.)

The pandemic delayed the Met's annual roof-garden commission by a year, but if any artist is worth the wait it's **Lauren Halsey,** a rising star whose dynamic sculptural installations are rooted in the Black culture of South Central L.A., where she and her family have lived for generations. The artist not only takes inspiration from her neighborhood; she also gives back—in

2020 Halsey founded the Summaeverythang Community Center, providing organic produce to locals. Expect ancestors inhabiting the museum's Egyptian-art galleries and its Afrofuturist period room to serve as muses. (Opens April 18.)

"Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Memory Map," at the Whitney, is, astonishingly, the city's first museum show dedicated to the protean New Mexico-based artist—a citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation—whose deftly satirical paintings, prints, drawings, and sculptures have been upending myths of American empire for fifty years. (Opens April 19.)

The Mexican painter Aliza Nisenbaum is a realist in the socially conscious vein of Diego Rivera and María Izquierdo (the first Mexican woman to exhibit in the U.S.), as well as an extravagantly talented colorist. Her tender portraits of local workers and residents are the subject of **"Aliza Nisenbaum: Queens, Lindo y Querido,"** at the Queens Museum. (Opens April 23.) ♦

Books

- **Why We Never Have Enough Time**
- **Briefly Noted**
- **Eleanor Catton Wants Plot to Matter Again**

Why We Never Have Enough Time

In her new book, Jenny Odell argues that structural forces have commodified our moments, days, and years. Can our lost time be reclaimed?

By Parul Sehgal



The intruder entered not through the door but through the window. Silently, it began making a home in the cool damp of Jenny Odell's kitchen, in a pig-shaped planter. The moss spores arrived in the spring that Odell began working on her book "Saving Time" (Random House). For the next three years, she and the moss shared air and sunlight as she wrote at the kitchen table, the rhizoids that grabbed at the soil taking root in her imagination. "It has been a reminder of time," she writes about her unlikely companion. "Not the monolithic, empty substance imagined to wash over each of us alone, but the kind that starts and stops, bubbles up, collects in the cracks, and folds into mountains. It is the kind that waits for the right conditions, that holds always the ability to begin something new."

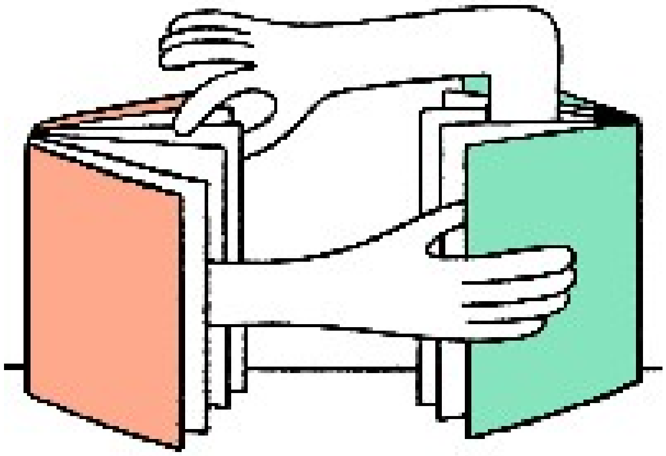
Odell's work has a knack for finding the right conditions and anchoring itself in them. Her previous book, "How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy" (2019), became a surprise best-seller, raising an alarm about how social media had fractured our capacity for deep focus and

corralled us into relentless self-optimization. Although a glut of books on attention were vying for our own, hers stood out—not for the originality of its argument, I suspect, but for the sincerity of her persona on the page. Here was a multidisciplinary artist for whom the Internet was a native landscape; now she was teaching herself to see her surroundings, to notice more—more birds, more flowers—and claiming far-reaching consequences for simple acts of awareness. Looking up, looking around is the "seed of responsibility," she argued. It was the prelude to enlarging one's notion of community and our obligations to it.

In "Saving Time," with moss as muse, Odell deepens her approach and amplifies her pitch. She wrote this book to save her life, she explains, as she struggled to understand why the world came to be organized for profit and not for human or ecological thriving. She charts how clocks emerged as "tools of domination": the standardization of time by church bells, then by the nineteenth-century railroads; the colonial mission of using labor as a "civilizing" force; and the ways that time has been progressively commodified and disciplined, from the factories of the early twentieth century to the floors of contemporary Amazon warehouses. A capitalist, Western notion of profit and efficiency has stamped out other, more salutary and less linear measures of time, she argues, as she draws passionately if vaguely on Indigenous conceptions of time. Modernity has pulled us out of synch with nature and the needs of our bodies; it has depleted our inner and outer worlds.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Odell approaches these matters with acute sensitivity and feeling. And yet a larger question persists. Why does a book so concerned with the looming issues of our day, and possessed of such an urgent authorial voice, feel like such a time sink?

“Saving Time” joins a ripening genre—on burnout, on the depletion of working and parenting during the pandemic, on the “great resignation”—that champions the revolutionary potential of rest. Human attention is presented as an endangered public resource, befouled by the attention economy, tech companies, virtual workplaces, Slack notifications. To lose the capacity for deep, sustained focus is to lose everything, we’re told—it is to insure loss after loss. We fiddle with our phones while the world burns. Indeed, “attention” seems to occupy the space that “empathy” once did, when President Obama warned of an “empathy deficit” and critics made fervent claims about reading novels as a way to understand other points of view. Columnists still prescribe novels, but as a way to retrieve our concentration. In one recent book, Sheila Liming’s “Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time,” we’re told that unstructured social time, freed from the pressures of productivity, could save our souls. Then, there’s the botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, a critical influence on Odell’s work and the author of “Braiding Sweetgrass”—which has spent more than two years on the best-seller lists—who argues that “our attention has been hijacked by our

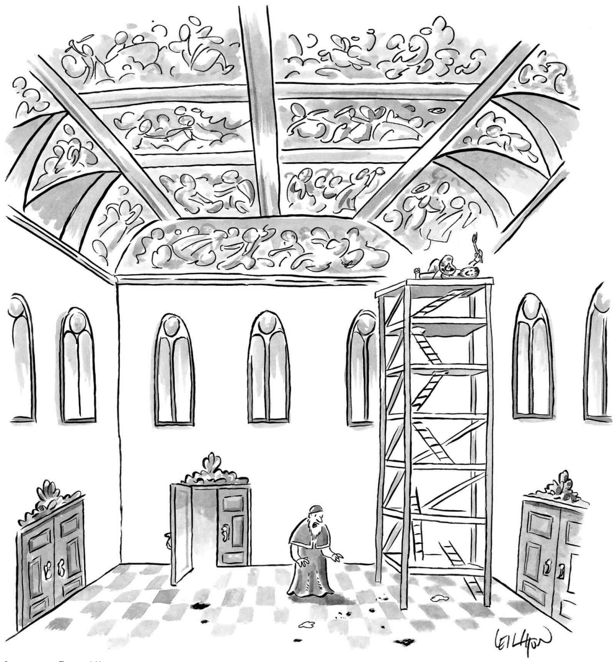
economy, by marketers saying you should be paying attention to consumption, you should be paying attention to violence, political division."

Kimmerer has playfully envisioned a world in which Fox News was about actual foxes: "What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? That that's newsworthy? This beautiful gift of attention that we human beings have is being hijacked to pay attention to products and someone else's political agenda. Whereas if we can reclaim our attention and pay attention to things that really matter, there a revolution starts." We hear similar appeals in recent work by Rebecca Solnit and, going back, by Annie Dillard, even D. H. Lawrence—the notion that tending to an actual garden can make us fitter stewards of our minds and, ultimately, our world.

Such writers often enact the kind of attention they cherish, employing language rich and precise, filled with moments of languor and epiphany. But Odell marches us along, gesturing to choppy outlines of the books she consults to piece together the story. Her own thinking feels curiously muted. Odell taught digital art at Stanford for almost ten years and frequently works with collage. Her method, she has said, involves putting different objects next to one another and "seeing what happens"—items from a local dump, for example, that she displays along with notes about their origins. In this book, however, her collages produce not surprise or poignance but a sense of cutting and pasting, of breathless summary. In his novel "Slowness," Milan Kundera describes "a secret bond" between slowness and remembering, and, conversely, between speed and forgetting. A man walking down the street tries to recall something; without realizing it, he slows down. Another man, recalling an unpleasant episode, begins to walk faster, as if creating distance from the memory, trying to outpace it. I recalled these lines while trying to keep up with Odell. Why is this book about time in such a hurry?

Perhaps her hope is to rush past the fact that so many of her observations are commonplaces. The "modern view of time can't be extricated from the wage relationship," she reports, as if the knowledge were hard-won. As I read, I told myself that some hidden seams would surely be discovered, fresh evidence brought forth, complacencies unravelled; Odell seems to hint as much, hailing the benefits of dissonance and doubt. ("Simply as a gap in the known, doubt can be the emergency exit that leads somewhere else.")

Instead, we are led down a path of truisms to a well-padded account of how the capitalist logic of increase squeezes dignity from our days. “Accepting a life with less of a certain type of ambition is not the same as settling for a life with less meaning,” Odell writes.

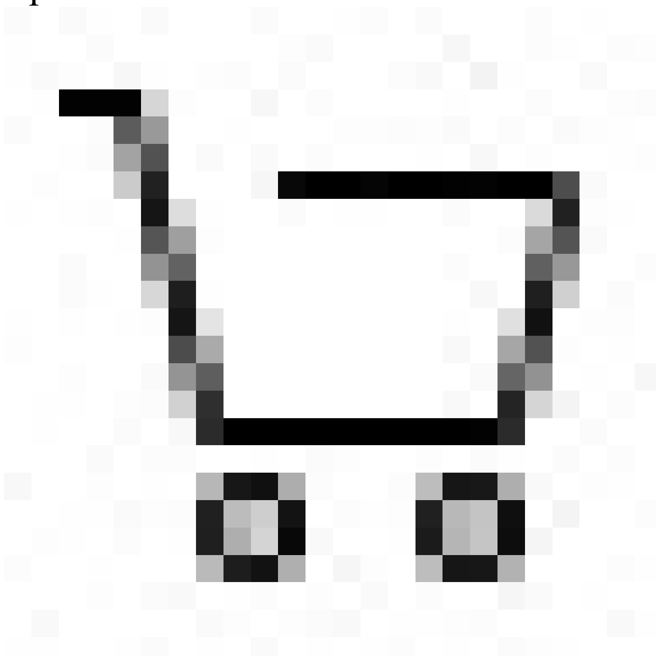


“Look at my floor!”
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

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Moss grows through division; the hasty chapters of “Saving Time” sprout and spread in a similar way. A section on leisure time wanders from a consideration of what rest is supposed to accomplish—just enough recovery to enable further work?—to how Black people have been harassed and attacked while engaging in leisure outdoors, such as birding or swimming. Odell ends by wondering whether “something like leisure could be possible in a world saturated by patriarchy, capitalism and colonialisms old and new.”

It’s a revealing question. After “How to Do Nothing” appeared, skeptics complained that it extolled the kind of languorous leisure time that few people were likely to possess. How easy to be present in mountain cabins, to “witness” while spending afternoons in a rose garden, to “prefer not to” during summers off from teaching at Stanford! Some readers groused that her prescriptions were innocent of structural forces or collective action, arguing only for the powers of “solitude, observation, and simple conviviality.” The criticism evidently found its mark: what Odell seems to be trying to outpace in “Saving Time” are those very accusations. The result is a book of hectic history and dutiful structural analysis, every sentence turtled against the arrows of social critique. “The world is ending—but which world?” she writes. “Consider that many worlds have ended, just as many worlds have been born and are about to be born.” Also: “I suggest an

adjustment of discretion: experimenting with what looks like mediocrity in some parts of your life. Then you might have a moment to wonder *why* and *to whom* it seems mediocre." The best defense, evidently, is to avoid any offense.

Odell's signal question is to ask whose time is being devalued. I began to respond in the margins, faintly at first, and then with despair. Whose time is being devalued? *Mine*, I wrote. Of all the "overlapping temporalities" Odell attends to, the one she seems indifferent to is the time unspooling within her book. A writer, after all, is in the business of taking up time; time is her medium. It is not an unusual experience to feel that one's time has been misused by a book, but it is novel, and particularly vexing, to feel that one's time has been misused by a passionate denunciation of the misuse of time—and by a writer who invokes the act of reading to illustrate the very attention she enshrines. "*This* is real," she writes in "How to Do Nothing": "Your eyes reading this text, your hands, your breath, the time of day, the place where you are reading this—these things are real."

Very often, problems of style and pacing are actually problems of thinking, and here is where one difficulty of "Saving Time" lies. Odell is working with ideas that demand careful, persuasive articulation: the interrelation of so many injustices, how to translate grief into language and language into action. Instead, we receive a relentless synthesis of other people's work, often in the style of clotted—and sometimes incautious—Wikipedia summaries. Although the roots of Western temporal notions and distortions of time, for instance, are carefully mapped, Indigenous American traditions feel lumped together (sometimes with precolonial conceptions of time from other places in the world), shorn of context, of their own intellectual histories and contingencies. The absence of original thought is striking, suggestive—as if, after the objections to "How to Do Nothing," the writer is taking cover behind the words of others, or, fretting about the individual as neoliberal construction, is now inclined to keep any thoughts of her own decorously offstage.

And yet it is on the individual level that time's real textures and oddities are experienced. Odell knows this; she describes, for example, how her time felt so disorganized early in the pandemic (while carefully copping to her relative comfort and privilege). She tells us, wistfully, that she wishes to

uncover ways of experiencing time that aren't linked to pain, as if these methods didn't exist all around her. In truth, every pleasure worth its name —music, sex, drugs, novel-reading—derives its particular rush from how it alters our sense of time, how it crumples it up or extends it into something long, lush, and strange.

The artist Anne Truitt observes, in the final published volume of her journals, "My sculptures are in a way analogous to time. The intrinsic nature of what they are made of is emerging: chemical changes in the paint on *Gloucester* and a characteristic of the poplar wood of which *Valley Forge* was constructed." Later, she writes, "If I made a sculpture it would just stand there and time would roll over its head and the light would come and the light would go and it would be continuously revealed." Perhaps we're little different from her sculptures—both made of time and subject to time, parts of us emerging and evolving within it.

Our struggle to behave responsibly and sanely with time—often labelled "distraction"—isn't merely a matter of being manipulated. "We mustn't let Silicon Valley off the hook, but we should be honest: much of the time, we give in to distraction willingly," Oliver Burkeman writes in his recent book "Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals." "Something in us wants to be distracted, whether by our digital devices or anything else—to *not* spend our lives on what we thought we cared about the most." Burkeman's point is that our minds wander as a reprieve from difficulty, sensing our limits.

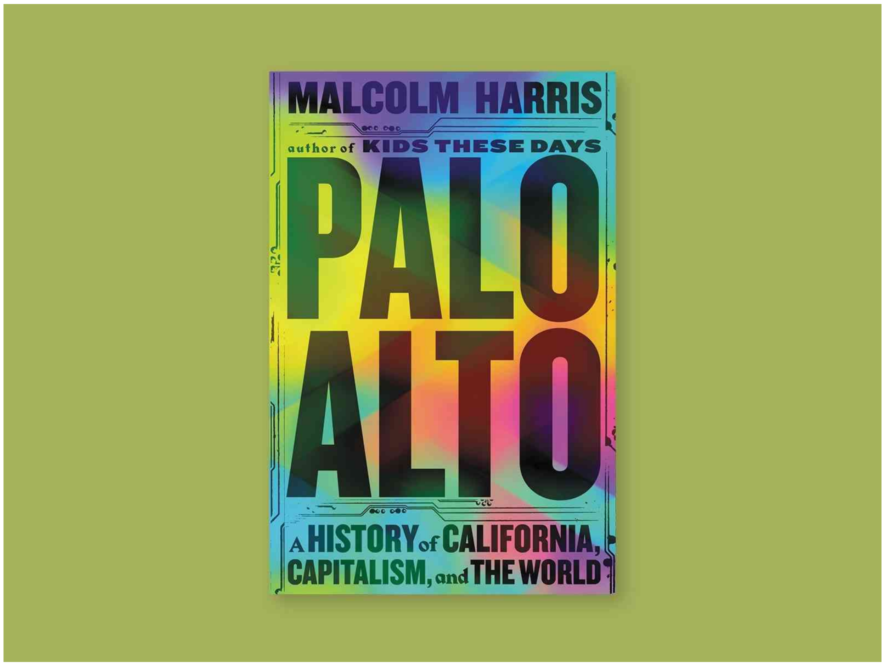
The limits of Odell's book, in turn, arise from a catechistic indexing of abstract forces, a harried sprint through familiar analyses that scarcely accommodates the waywardness of specific human experience. No moss grows under her feet, she can assure herself. But a book that spent less of its time reprising our era's commonplaces would have made better use of ours. ♦

By Rachel Aviv

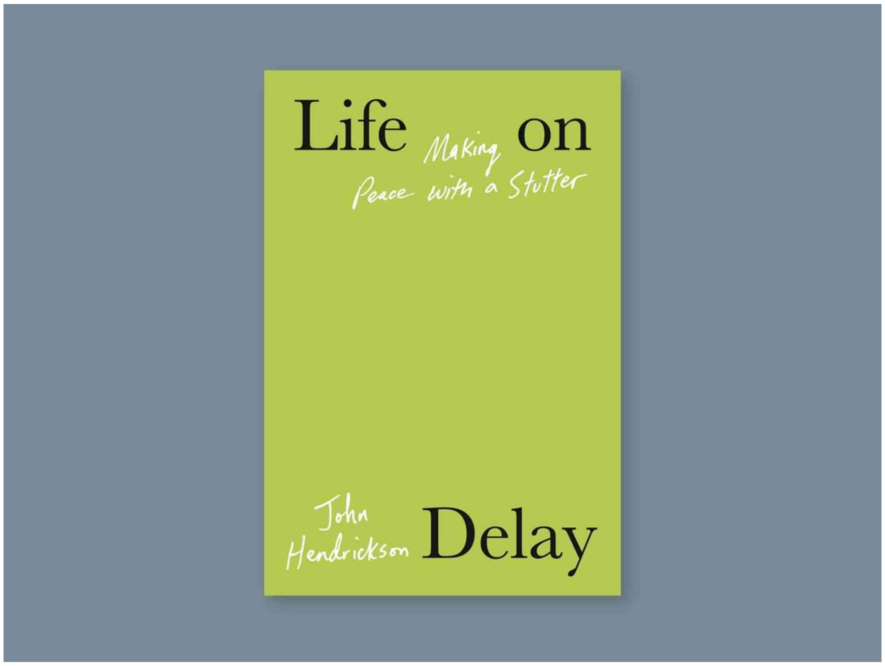
By James Lasdun

By Caitlin Reid

By Ricardo Nuila



Palo Alto, *by Malcolm Harris (Little, Brown)*. A useful counter to Silicon Valley's self-mythologizing, this history of Palo Alto begins in the late nineteenth century, with the state-funded genocide of Alta Indians by settlers and the coming of the railroad, which led, via the fortune of Leland Stanford, to the establishment of Stanford University ("the pseudostate governing Palo Alto"). Harris highlights the city's connection to the horrors of napalm, Japanese internment, and eugenics, and notes that many of the early tech companies in the area began "in the space between the military and academia." Their success, he writes, "represents the triumph of software over hardware, of advertising over production, of monopoly over competition, of capital over labor."

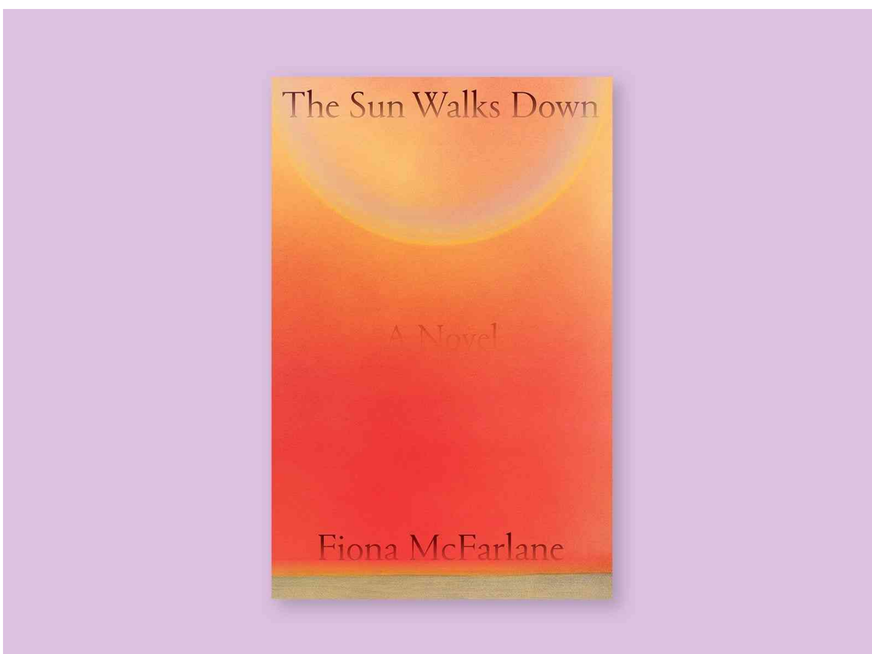


Life on Delay, *by John Hendrickson (Knopf)*. “Nearly every decision in my life has been shaped by my struggle to speak,” Hendrickson writes in this moving exploration of stuttering. A stutterer since childhood, he spent years in therapy, waiting in vain “for this strange thing to exit my body.” Many stutterers do largely overcome their impediment (including the actress Emily Blunt, whom Hendrickson interviews), but others never do. Why this is so remains a neuroscientific mystery. Hendrickson presents a wealth of fascinating detail (virtually all stutterers, for instance, can sing and recite fluently), but the real draw lies in his account of his personal experiences, which convey something essential about the challenge of being human.

The Best Books of 2023

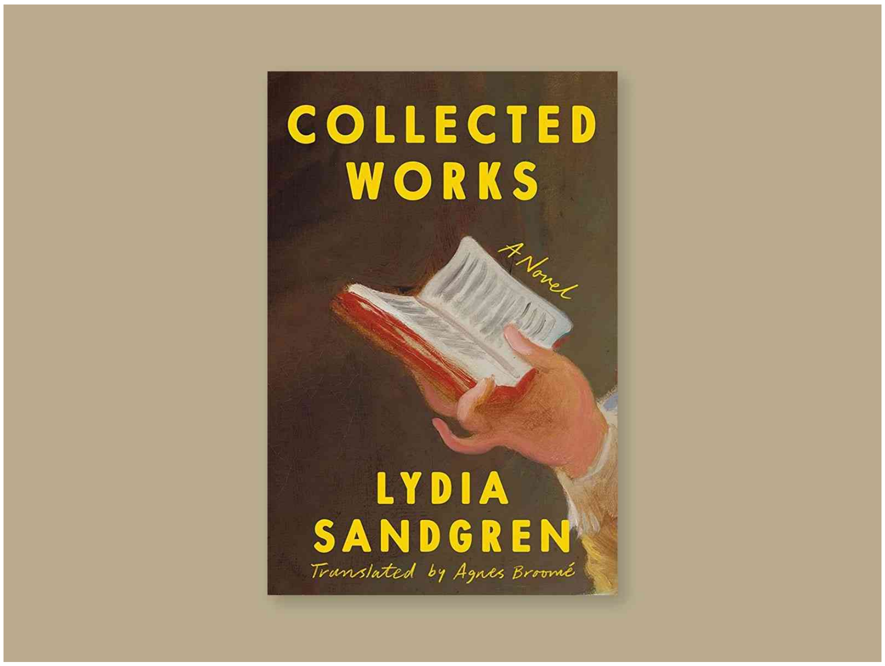


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



[The Sun Walks Down](#), *by Fiona McFarlane (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Set in rural Australia in the late nineteenth century, this ambitious novel assembles a band of characters—including a white farmer, an Aboriginal farmhand, and a Swedish painter—who are drawn together by the

disappearance, in a dust storm, of a six-year-old boy. McFarlane's figures emerge in intricate detail, defined by their petty desires, their moral imperfections, and their relationship both to the cataclysm of colonization and to the grandiosity of the landscape and the sun, which, for some, takes on near-divine significance. "There's no way to describe these skies," the painter writes to a colleague in Europe. "If I had to try, I would say that they are light shipwrecked by dark."



Collected Works, *by Lydia Sandgren, translated from the Swedish by Agnes Broomé (Astra)*. Poised at the intersection of life and art, reality and imagination, this novel blends the thrill of mystery with the curiosity and depth of philosophical inquiry. Fifteen years after Cecilia Berg goes missing, her husband, Martin, is haunted by memories of their shared youthful intellectual ambitions, by the artistic struggles of their friend Gustav, and by professional and family worries. Narrated alternately by Martin and his daughter, Rakel, the novel refracts Cecilia's absence through the literary and artistic concerns of those who remain. Rakel reflects that a picture "is always created at the expense of another picture." She says, "The Cecilia of Gustav's paintings pushed another Cecilia out of the frame. . . . And who was she?"

By Cal Newport

By Richard Brody

By Ian Parker

By Rebecca Mead

Eleanor Catton Wants Plot to Matter Again

In “Birnam Wood,” the novelist suggests that choices—how they’re made, and the long, hidden trail of their consequences—are what lend a story meaning.

By B. D. McClay



Toward the end of “Birnam Wood” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), the latest novel from the New Zealand writer Eleanor Catton, Rosie Demarney, an otherwise minor character, gets a moment in the spotlight. She has been presented with a series of facts that seem to add up to a humiliating conclusion: the guy she likes has blown her off to pursue an old flame. Her fears are only confirmed by the embarrassed gaze of her crush’s sister. At home, clinging to her self-respect by a thread, Rosie firmly tells herself that she “was *not* going to play the role that he had cast her in; she was *not* going to spend the evening in her sweatpants, getting drunk and stalking him pathetically online.” A beat, a line break, and then the inevitable: “But hell. Nobody was watching.”

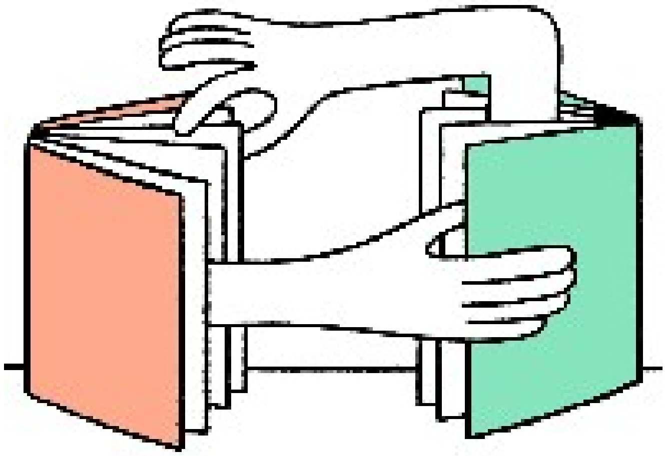
By now, if readers of “Birnam Wood” have learned one thing, it’s that someone is always watching. Whether people are being spied on by the modern technologies of surveillance (Google, G.P.S., cell phones, drones, social media) or by the more ancient techniques of intimacy (marriage, friendship, family, gossip), they are never afforded the luxury of a purely private action, or of avoiding the roles that others have written for them.

“Birnam Wood” opens with a seemingly impersonal catastrophe: a landslide in New Zealand kills five people. From this disaster a complex and often shocking sequence of events unfolds. The Darvishes, the owners of a large farm near the accident, withdraw it from sale; this withdrawal comes to the attention of Mira Bunting, “aged twenty-nine, a horticulturalist by training, and the founder of an activist collective known among its members as Birnam Wood.” Mira had previously inquired about the listing under a false identity, and she decides to visit: Birnam Wood illegally plants gardens on unused land, and the farm seems an ideal target for expansion. While trespassing on the grounds, she meets a curt American stranger who knows too much about her, including her name. He is Robert Lemoine, the billionaire co-founder of Autonomo, a drone manufacturer.

He is also, as we quickly learn, though Mira does not, responsible for the landslide. It doesn’t trouble him much. “Five dead, in the scheme of things, was basically no dead at all,” he thinks. Lemoine is in New Zealand pretending to build a covert apocalypse bunker; to this end, he is purchasing the Darvish farm under conditions of total secrecy, so secret that the estate must seem not to be for sale at all. But his actual aims are much darker: Korowai, the national park that sits beside the farm, possesses rare-earth minerals, which if extracted will make Lemoine “the richest person who had ever lived.” In Mira, Lemoine sees a kindred spirit, but also a dupe. He can use Birnam Wood as another smoke screen, a way to launder his presence through a local, eco-friendly organization. He offers Mira access to the farm and a hundred thousand dollars, suspecting, correctly, that she’ll find both the financial security and his shadowy mystique irresistible.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Much like the moment in pool when the cue ball breaks up the carefully assembled triangle, this encounter between Mira and Lemoine ends up affecting every other character in the book, even those who have no reason to know one another. The choices they make, to use and to be used, reverberate in ways you might expect only if the image of the five crushed landslide victims lingers as you read. All of the book's major players get a chance to turn the tide of events in their favor. Shelley Noakes, Mira's best friend and roommate, is stealthily seeking a way out of the collective, tired of playing the steady foil to her more volatile friend. The Darvishes—Sir Owen and his wife, Lady Darvish—view Lemoine's incredible wealth with a mixture of disgust, awe, and desire, even as they conduct business with him. And, finally, there's Tony Gallo, Rosie's love interest, Mira's ex-*something*, and a former member of Birnam Wood, who, in a paroxysm of barely sublimated sexual jealousy, has decided to write an exposé of Lemoine, and in so doing stumbles upon Lemoine's mining operation.

All of these people think that, with a little luck, they can manipulate another party to their advantage—even when they know that the others think the same of them, even when they are plotting betrayals on the fly, even when some of their plans are immediate and abject failures. (When Shelley first encounters Tony, she thinks that he presents an easy way to end her friendship with Mira: she will simply seduce him. She does not succeed.)

Like Rosie, they have no intention of merely playing a role that somebody else wrote for them. And, like Rosie, they end up doing it anyway.

We do not live in the golden age of plot, at least where literary fiction is concerned. Outside of what we might call high-genre books—the thrillers of Ruth Rendell, say, or the crime novels of Tana French—it's rare for a literary novel to take its plot seriously. Instead, contemporary literary fiction largely concerns itself with other things: moods, problems, situations. Few people would dream of writing a novel without characters, but a novel without a plot is practically normal. When you speak of what a novel is about, you speak thematically—it's about surveillance, or displacement, or heterosexuality, or something along these lines.

In a recent interview, Catton commented, somewhat blandly, that "the moral development of people in plotted novels where people make choices is fascinating and important. I'd like to see more books like that." Her interest in plot as something that arises from human choice, and not just from the context in which those choices take place, means that her own plots take a sideways approach. Just as we are constantly summing up books as types, the characters in "Birnam Wood" are constantly summing up one another, often incorrectly. When Shelley tries to seduce Tony—who, after a sojourn in Mexico, had completely forgotten that she existed—he is overwhelmed by their similarities, "astonished that he could ever have forgotten someone so thoroughly simpatico as Shelley Noakes." Catton adds, in a rare direct address to the audience:

> It never crossed his mind that since *she* had not forgotten *him*, the personality that she revealed to him might very easily have been customised, the opinions tailored, the résumé adapted, to suit what she remembered of his interests and his taste; never dreaming that she might be flirting with him, he reflected only that there was something appealingly familiar in her candid warmth and air of frank and ready capability.

One of Catton's favorite moves is to conclude a scene from one character's perspective only to start the next scene from the perspective of an adjacent character—someone whom the first character got slightly wrong. Shelley's frantic musing about how to confess to Mira her desire to leave Birnam

Wood is undercut by our realization that Mira has divined this desire weeks earlier. Mira's perception of their relationship is undercut when, worried that Shelley has already left, she gets out her phone to check a "location tracker app that they had both installed . . . and never used." But Shelley, we happen to know, uses the app to keep tabs on Mira all the time. They share an understanding of their friendship—that Mira is the top dog and Shelley is the sidekick, and that Shelley is "smothered" by this dynamic—that may not be true at all, or not true in the way they think.

Unlike Donna Tartt, who uses plot as straightforwardly as Dickens, or Sally Rooney, who has remade the marriage plot for a post-marriage era, Catton lets her plots and their attendant stakes emerge from a general situation. Like her characters, we begin without a sense of what matters, and are often pointed in the wrong direction. Initially, "Birnam Wood" seems to have no aspirations beyond an exploration of young, white, left-wing radicalism and its accompanying guilt—the kind of book that is "about" the anxiety of being a good person under capitalism and/or climate change. Mira fantasizes about brutal deaths in order to punish herself for feeling insufficiently bad about them. ("She compelled herself to imagine being crushed and suffocated, holding the thought in her mind's eye for several seconds.") Tony wants to argue about identity politics. When Mira allies herself with Lemoine, agreeing, over Tony's protests, to let him finance Birnam Wood, we think we know how this will go: some hand-wringing, followed by some form of sexual congress, followed by a shrug over the problems of selling out.

We are wrong. "Birnam Wood" 's biggest twist is not so much a particular event as the realization that this is a book in which everything that people choose to do matters, albeit not in ways they may have anticipated. Catton has a profound command of how perceptions lead to choice, and of how choice, for most of us, is an act of self-definition. Take Mira, whose determination not to be typecast lends her a stubbornness that's easily mistaken for strength of character. Like some of her friends, Mira assumes that Lemoine's interest in her is sexual: indeed, she spends time first imagining a scenario in which she's propositioned and, ice-cold, turns him down, then an alternative, deflationary scenario in which she sleeps with him to prove that she's not a prude. Her need to be unpredictable makes her easy to manipulate—it wouldn't be unfair to say that she takes Lemoine's

money to show that she's more than an idealist. But this choice is not, ultimately, about her. It invites violence, both symbolically—Birnam Wood now runs on "blood money," as Tony puts it—and, as the book goes on, quite literally. The idea that her choices could affect something other than her internal narrative doesn't occur to Mira, because it doesn't often occur to anybody.

Meanwhile, "Birnam Wood" 's true turns are all carefully set up, as long as you're focussing on the right details. But none of the characters pay attention to the right things; they all think their snap impressions tell them what they need to know. Even Lemoine's canny manipulation of others relies on the kind of lie that looks like the truth: a bunker is what people will expect him to be hiding, so that's what he *must* be hiding. Discovering that they live in a world of consequence, with stakes bigger than self-image or self-respect, is as much of a shock to the characters as it is to us. Congratulations, Catton seems to say, on being just smart enough to play yourself.

Catton's own choices are not without their critics. In a review of her second novel, the Booker Prize-winning "The Luminaries," a critic for the *Guardian* wrote that the book was "a massive shaggy dog story; a great empty bag; an enormous, wicked, gleeful cheat." But "The Luminaries" does tell a real story—a story of fated lovers—that it reveals only by inches. This romance, which appears to transcend the limits of space, is so heartfelt as to be, when put in plain view, almost embarrassing. For most of the book, it's obscured, and we spend the first five or six hundred pages meeting the many characters whose various, complex, and sometimes tragic lives are, in the end, merely secondary. We discover what all of this is about at the same time they do.

Although "The Luminaries" stretches this form of emergent storytelling to the breaking point—it might not be a cheat, but several hundred pages is a long time to spend on misdirection—it's clear that Catton is trying both to revive plot as a literary mode and to consider what a story line looks like in our real, unplotted life, in which things reveal themselves to have a shape only in retrospect. This project appears in a more subdued form in "The Rehearsal," Catton's début novel, which begins with a scandal: a student and a teacher have been discovered in a sexual affair. Everything in "The

Rehearsal" takes place in a realm of high artifice, characterized by people who are so exact in their speech that you're terrified to contemplate what they might *not* be saying. "A film of soured breast milk clutches at your daughter like a shroud," a saxophone teacher informs the mother of a student. "Do you hear me, with your mouth like a thin scarlet thread and your deflated bosom and your stale mustard blouse?"

No saxophone teacher, or human being, for that matter, has ever spoken anything even approaching these words, but the arch, direct tone re-creates the unsettling world of adolescence, and the murky nature of adult expectation, more precisely than realism could. We expect the "story" of "The Rehearsal" to be about the fallout from the student-teacher affair. But this is really the backdrop for the novel's true story, which is how the saxophone teacher tries—and fails—to use her students to reënact the story of her own frustrated love for another woman, with a different, happier ending. She fails because she cannot control the students' choices any more than she could those of her onetime friend.

This willingness to let characters be mistaken—really, lastingly mistaken—is another quality that emerges from Catton's privileging of human choice. When Tony uncovers proof of Lemoine's rare-earth mining, he draws reasonable but slightly incorrect conclusions, assuming that Lemoine must be conspiring with Sir Darvish instead of deceiving him. The only people who would be in a position to correct him don't—and so he carries on with this not false, but not true, version of events to the end. When Rosie Demarney, alone in her apartment, succumbs to an evening of Internet-stalking Tony, she stumbles across evidence that he could be in danger. In a Dickens novel, a character like Rosie might turn out to be pivotal; she'd connect the dots and save the day. Instead, she leaves the story for good. Would you, after all, go on a wild chase for someone you'd just been drunkenly Googling in your sweatpants? Someone you didn't really know? Would it even matter if you tried?

One of the tragedies that plot brings to light is the degree to which our inner lives and intentions can simply come to nothing—unrealized despite our best efforts, misunderstood and fruitless, as the story we played our part in generating goes on without us. It is only by elevating human choice that we can see how often our choices don't matter, after all. Or maybe it would be

better to say that our choices matter only unpredictably. There's no way of knowing what will really count until later, and by then it's too late. Better choose.

In the course of "Birnam Wood," Lemoine hacks phones, infiltrates e-mail accounts, operates drones with spy cameras, and employs a team of covert operatives. In his relentless surveillance, he is half critic, half author, and, in his own estimation, a kind of god. Like Catton, he tricks people into seeing what they expect to see.

But surveillance isn't reading, much less writing; it's data captured without interpretation. Instead of characters, we get types; instead of principles, revealed preferences. "A marketing algorithm doesn't see you as a human being," Tony says at one point, having lost his temper with another member of Birnam Wood:

> It sees you purely as a matrix of categories: a person who's female, and heterosexual . . . and white, and university-educated, and employed, who has *these* kinds of friends and shares *these* kinds of articles and posts *these* kinds of pictures and makes *these* kinds of searches . . . . Identity politics, intersectionality, whatever you call it—it's the exact same thing.

It must be true that people often are what, on the surface, they seem to be; if it weren't, algorithms wouldn't have much use at all. There's a certain pleasure in being a known type. At one point, Lemoine notes how "being a cliché can be very useful," as it makes other people "think they've seen all there is to see." Lady Darvish, musing on her marriage, thinks that her husband "took a certain pride in being so predictable . . . for the simple reason that he loved to see her demonstrate how well she understood him."

Here, though, the implication is that we can read people *without* reducing them to a type. Owen Darvish loves to watch his wife "take that caricature and refine it, improving the likeness, adding depth and subtlety, shading it in." Although not an optimistic book, "Birnam Wood" suggests that the greatest spook technology of all remains human love, with all its presumptive qualities, and that no external approximation will ever beat it at its game. There are things you just won't know about other people, even if

you intercept every text and every e-mail, unless you have loved them for a long time. There are gambles you are willing to take, acts of heroism and trust you are willing to commit to, because you know that you know them.

As for whether those acts matter, “Birnam Wood,” like all good books, doesn’t supply an answer. Reading it, I was drawn to the question of who represents Macbeth, the king who would be defeated only when “Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him.” Macbeth is a character severed from choice. Prophecy, like a mystical surveillance system, keeps him blameless and safe: he is simply the man who is going to be king, and he does what he must do in order to preserve himself. In studying how much this or that person resembled him, I thought about ambition, deceit, paranoia, and unscrupulous ascension to power. I wondered who would be one of the witches, or, for that matter, Macduff. I wondered a lot of things—and yet it didn’t occur to me until the book’s final pages that the most significant attribute Macbeth possesses is something much more straightforward, at least where plot is concerned. Because Macbeth doesn’t understand what he’s told, because he lets prophecy make his choices for him, because he is at heart a cowardly man, when he’s faced with a certain human ingenuity, he loses. ♦

By Nathan Goldman

By Katy Waldman

By Saidiya Hartman

By Richard Brody

Brave New World Dept.

- [Biomilq and the New Science of Artificial Breast Milk]

Biomilq and the New Science of Artificial Breast Milk

The biotech industry takes on infant nutrition.

By Molly Fischer



Not long ago, I suited up in a white coat and safety goggles and entered a quiet laboratory where an experiment at the frontiers of science and parenthood was under way. A young engineer with a tidy beard escorted me past rows of benches to a large freezer. He opened it to reveal an array of ice-caked steel drawers and, wearing blue Cryo-Gloves (reverse oven mitts, essentially), removed a small bottle from the chill, which measured minus eighty degrees Celsius. At the bottom of the bottle, two hundred and fifty millilitres of liquid had formed a shallow, colorless puck.

I was visiting Biomilq, a startup, founded by Leila Strickland and Michelle Egger, that is working to produce lab-grown breast milk. Biomilq's headquarters are in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, a seven-thousand-acre wedge of pine forests and office complexes between Durham, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh. The bottle creaked as it began to adjust to the room's warmth, and the engineer hastened to put it back in the freezer.

You could call the bottle's contents Biomilq, or maybe just milk, or, as the engineer did—indicating a number of smaller bottles also stowed in the freezer—"our best shots to date." The frozen puck represented a week and a half's worth of output from a single line of lab-cultured human mammary cells. The company hopes to use these cells and others like them to re-create as closely as possible the process of making human milk. About three years before my visit, in February of 2020, Biomilq announced that it had successfully used cells to produce lactose and casein, a sugar and a protein found in breast milk. "Our opinion as a company—and most of us internally, too—is that breast-feeding, at the breast, has benefits that no one will ever be able to mimic," Egger, a food scientist turned entrepreneur, told me. "If you can breast-feed—do it. Great. But the reality is, a majority of parents cannot exclusively breast-feed. . . . And that's not for lack of trying."

Breast milk is often described as a kind of elixir—"perfect nutrition," in the words of a 2015 paper in *Early Human Development*. The health benefits that have been attributed to breast milk include protection against asthma, diabetes, diarrhea, ear infections, eczema, obesity, and sudden infant death syndrome. Some much cited research also credits breast milk with producing smarter children, although this is difficult to substantiate. Tabulating a complete science-backed list of the advantages of breast milk over infant formula can be a challenge. The available data are limited by a lack of structural support for breast-feeding. There are, for example, statistical concerns about comparing parents who can't undertake the time-intensive process of breast-feeding with those who can. (Studies tend to show that parents who breast-feed are more educated and affluent than parents who don't, and thus confer other benefits on their children.) Regardless of the precise details of breast milk's advantages, it remains the widely acknowledged gold standard in infant nutrition; to replicate it in a laboratory would be alchemy. On a neon sign in Biomilq's office, the words "*Making Magic*" hang beneath the curve of a decorously abstract lactating breast.

In a conference room labelled "*Skim*," I met with Strickland, a mother of two with cropped wavy hair and a soft lisp. On one wall was a series of photographs, by Sophie Harris-Taylor, that depict nursing mothers in various states of domestic weariness and serenity. The photos were among the first things that Egger bought for Biomilq's workspace—a purchase in keeping with the company's efforts to build a mom-forward brand. At the heart of

those efforts is Strickland's own experience with breast-feeding. Fourteen years ago, Strickland, then a postdoctoral fellow in cell biology at Stanford, became pregnant. At the time, she lived near Santa Cruz, a beach town in Northern California where a particular goddess-mama vibe around maternity prevailed. "Culturally, there was a lot of promotion of, like, 'You want to do a natural birth, you don't want an epidural,' " she told me. "You know, 'Your body is made for this.' " To some extent, Strickland embraced that attitude. She certainly planned to breast-feed. But the first weeks of her baby's life called those expectations into question. "When you find, actually, my body is not making enough milk for my baby—what's up with that?" she said. "Is my body actually *not* made for this?"

Strickland began to think of her struggle, a not uncommon one, as a scientific challenge. Then, in 2013, a tissue engineer named Mark Post unveiled a hamburger made from lab-grown beef. Produced at a cost of some three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, it tasted, in Post's words, "reasonably good," and helped to kick off a period of burgeoning interest among investors in "cellular agriculture," an area of biotechnology devoted to finding lab-grown alternatives to conventional agricultural products. Startups were using engineered yeast to generate animal proteins, or were culturing animal cells directly. Strickland and her husband, a software developer, were excited about the possibilities. What if there were a way to generate breast milk from cells in a lab? They had moved to North Carolina a few years earlier, and Strickland started to experiment using tissue from a cow udder and secondhand lab equipment. In 2019, a mutual friend introduced Strickland to Egger, a Duke M.B.A. student focussed on social entrepreneurship. (Strickland and her husband are now separated. They are currently litigating disputes over the product and its name, ownership, genesis, and technology. He continues to operate an L.L.C. that they formed together, 108Labs, through which he is pursuing lab-grown milk products on his own.)

Egger has a sign in her office that reads "*Wake me when I'm CEO*." She spent her early career at General Mills, where she helped develop such products as Lärabar, Go-Gurt, and low-sugar bulk yogurt for schools. While training as a food scientist, Egger had planned to avoid working on dairy—she has hyperosmia, a heightened sense of smell, and the world of bovine odors was uninviting—but the field's complexity drew her in. "Dairy

research is a little bit of art and science combined,” she told me. “Often we do things not because we know why it works but because we just know that it does.” Egger became Biomilq’s C.E.O.

In 2020, the company received $3.5 million in funding in a round led by Breakthrough Energy Ventures, an investment firm founded by Bill Gates. Biomilq’s early days were shaped by the pandemic. This came with difficulties—the company’s lab manager recalls trading with neighboring startups for gloves and pipettes during supply-chain shortages—but also unexpected benefits. Strickland and Egger would hear “Sesame Street” in the background during calls with investors and know that they were talking to working parents. In 2021, they closed a twenty-one-million-dollar series-A funding round. Then, in 2022, a national formula shortage brought urgent attention to the matter of how babies get fed. It was an opening for a company like Biomilq to promote an alternative—and the opening arrived in an era of enthusiasm for tech-based solutions to the fundamental problems of human life. If fertility and longevity were subject to biotech intervention, why not infant nutrition, too?

The process of making breast milk in a human body begins during pregnancy, when hormonal changes prompt mammary cells to multiply. After delivery, two of the pregnancy hormones—estrogen and progesterone—drop off, while prolactin remains. This spurs the mammary cells to draw carbohydrates, amino acids, and fatty acids from the mother’s bloodstream, and to convert these raw materials into the macronutrients required to feed a baby. In Biomilq’s case, the mammary cells come from milk and breast-tissue samples provided by donors, and the cells multiply in vitro under the care of a team of scientists tasked with keeping them “happy.” The cells are then moved to a hollow-fibre bioreactor—a large tube filled with hundreds of tiny porous tubes that are covered in a layer of the lab-grown cells. As nutrients flow through the small tubes, the cells secrete milk components into the large tube, where they collect.

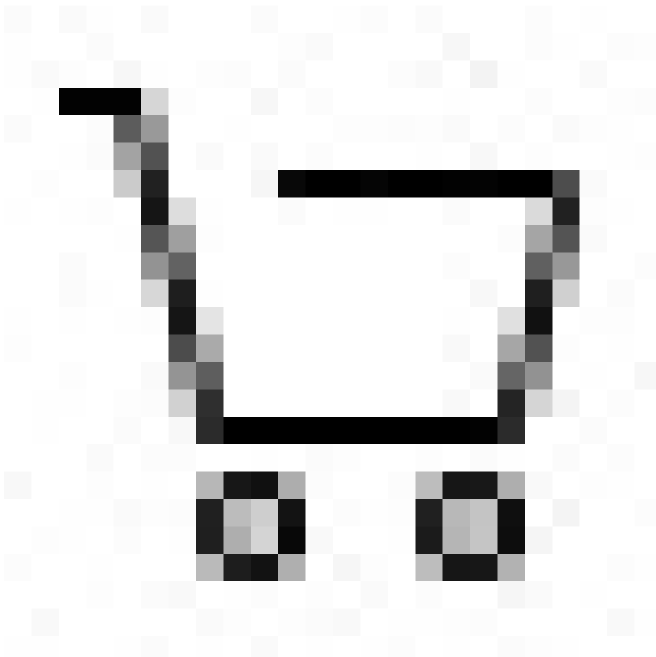


"Honey, did we order a hit?"
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

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Describing the results as “milk components,” not “milk,” is a crucial distinction. Biomilq has demonstrated that its technology can produce many of the macronutrients found in milk, including proteins, complex carbohydrates, and bioactive lipids, but it cannot yet create them in the same ratios and quantities necessary to approximate breast milk. Other elements of breast milk are beyond the scope of the company’s ambition. A mother’s antibodies, for example, are present in her milk, but they aren’t produced by the mammary cells, and, because Biomilq’s product will come from a sterile lab environment, it won’t offer any kind of beneficial gut bacteria.

Then there’s breast milk’s characteristic variability—the way its chemical composition changes over the course of months, days, even a single feed—and its ability to respond (through the mechanism of infant backwash, some suggest) to the nutritional needs of a particular baby. Whatever Biomilq winds up being, it will have to be uniform, and “that is *not* breast milk,” Strickland said. But she still believes in the power of what’s produced by the human mammary cell. Bovine milk and human milk may have some of the same proteins, but there are “species-specific differences in how those proteins are processed,” she said. “We believe that these components will be more bioactive, more absorbable, and interact better with the gut of the infant.”

Katherine Richeson, who oversees product development at Biomilq, is a cell biologist who conducted research on cancer therapies, including breast-cancer treatment, prior to coming to the company. She was struck by the dearth of research on mammary cells in relation to lactation. “Reading the literature didn’t take that long,” she told me. Bruce German, a chemist and food-science professor at the University of California, Davis, is a leading researcher on the subject of human milk. His work has shown how even indigestible parts of breast milk help to nourish bacteria that improve infants’ gut health. (German has also provided unpaid advice to Biomilq.) He sees the historic lack of academic interest in lactation as the result of prioritizing the concerns of “middle-aged white men” over those of mothers and infants. “There are more papers on wine than there are on milk,” he said.

Biomilq’s methods and equipment are drawn from the world of biopharmaceutical technology, and using them to create a commercially viable food product will require working on a radically different scale. “It’s a two-pronged challenge,” Strickland said. “We want to make orders of magnitude more stuff than what the technology is designed for today, and we want to sell that stuff orders of magnitude cheaper.” When asked about the company’s target consumer, Strickland said that it would be a “worst-case scenario” for her if Biomilq replicated the inequalities that already plague infant feeding. “I won’t consider it a success until it’s fully accessible,” she told me. Egger took a somewhat more pragmatic stance: the company was aiming to one day be priced “at the top end” of infant formula, and would likely be more expensive than that at the beginning. “While accessibility is first and foremost for us, it’s not going to be accessible to every person in the world immediately,” Egger said. For now, the company is making a pitch to customers who are already sold on the value of breast-feeding but are frustrated by its challenges, and who are willing to pay to get their child the next best thing.

The relative value of the next best thing is an open question. “What we care about is not just the best nutritional start in life—we’re looking for the best *start* in life,” Laurence Grummer-Strawn, who works at the World Health Organization and specializes in infant and early-childhood nutrition, told me. The “best start” offered by breast-feeding encompasses all the things impossible to incorporate into a cell-cultured product—breast milk’s fine-tuned changeability, the parent-child bonding. Without those, “we’re talking

about essentially a better formula," Grummer-Strawn went on. "But frankly, from a nutritional perspective, infant formula is not that bad." He saw the focus on minute chemical improvements as part of a broader American tendency to prioritize breast milk, the substance, over breast-feeding, the act.

I was thirty-one weeks pregnant when I visited Biomilq's headquarters, and by then I'd heard friends' stories of their own labor-intensive efforts to generate human milk. For people embarking on parenthood in 2023, breast-feeding is a recommendation right up there with "Read to your child" and "Don't smoke." A large number of American parents start out doing so—83.2 per cent of infants born in 2019 were breast-fed at least briefly, according to the C.D.C. But by six months—the age through which the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that babies consume only breast milk—24.9 per cent were exclusively breast-fed, and only 55.8 per cent were receiving breast milk at all. "It's pretty incontrovertible that breast-feeding is optimal nutrition for the baby," Olena Dobczansky, a nurse and lactation consultant who oversees the breast-feeding program at Manhattan's Lenox Hill Hospital, told me. It's just that families leave hospitals like hers and confront a reality that makes the A.A.P. guidelines sound fantastical. "A fourth of American mothers go back to work two weeks after having a baby," Dobczansky said. At that point postpartum, she noted, "you're still bleeding." Paid maternity leave—which, among high-income countries, only the U.S. does not mandate—translates to higher rates of breast-feeding.

Even for parents lucky enough to receive generous paid leave, it takes practice, and often the help of someone with experience, to get a baby properly latched and nursing. The journey from there may involve frightening uncertainty (is the baby getting enough to eat?) and physical discomfort (sore nipples, mastitis), and requires time—breast-feeding is, especially in the beginning, a constant occupation. Pumping necessitates its own choreography. Women I know became fluent in paraphernalia with names ranging from puns (the My Brest Friend nursing pillow) to euphemisms (the Simple Wishes hands-free pumping bra). Some presided over their own frosty vaults: pumping then stockpiling in dedicated freezers, and fretting over power outages during storms. Milk, I was learning, didn't have to be the result of biotech innovation to seem faintly experimental and very precious.

The story of breast-feeding in America could start with Cotton Mather, who admonished Puritan women to nurse their babies rather than become "one of the careless women, living at ease"—a call to health and hard work which has never quite abated where motherhood is concerned. But who breast-feeds and why has been defined by the same forces that shape life in America more broadly. In the antebellum South, for example, Black women were made to nurse white babies at the expense of their own. Nearly two hundred years later, Black women's breast-feeding rates lag behind those of other demographic groups, one of many health disparities—along with a stark maternal-mortality rate—that form part of the ongoing legacy of slavery.

"It's as fraught as abortion," Jacqueline Wolf, an emeritus historian of medicine at Ohio University and the author of a history of breast-feeding and formula in the U.S., aptly titled "Don't Kill Your Baby," told me. "There's almost nothing that raises more social issues than infant feeding." Wolf dates the emergence of what became known as "the feeding question" to the eighteen-seventies, when mothers across the country began raising concerns about their milk supply. "The big change that was sparked by urbanization and industrialization was suddenly having to pay attention to a mechanical clock," she said. Earlier infant-care manuals had advised feeding a baby when he showed signs of hunger. Now medical advice put infants on feeding schedules as rigid as railway timetables. But, as Wolf pointed out, "to build up a milk supply, you need to put the baby to the breast often, especially in the first few months." The women complaining that they lacked sufficient milk were not, as one theory had it, suffering from the ill effects of too much education during puberty. Rather, they were following advice unwittingly engineered to fail. The contours of the American conversation around breast-feeding were thus established: expert authority counselled one thing, practical reality dictated another, and mothers who found themselves caught in between were often regarded as the source of the problem.

One miracle solution of the late nineteenth century came from a new feature of urban life: milk laboratories, which provided some in the middle class with access to "percentage feeding." A doctor would study a baby's stool and arrive at a precise mathematical formula (hence "formula") for her diet. A milk-laboratory chemist would tweak cow's milk accordingly. The dominant school of thought in early-twentieth-century child-rearing valued

scientific rigor over intuition and tradition; kissing your baby excessively, much less nursing her, came to seem suspect. Even so, some authorities endorsed the medical value of breast-feeding. In 1937, *Ladies' Home Journal* published an article headlined "Babies Should Be Breast-fed," written by Dr. Herman N. Bundesen, the president of the Chicago Board of Health. Bundesen used public-health statistics to make his case: "*Out of every ten babies who die in the first year of life, eight are bottle fed—not breast fed*." (Don't kill your baby!)

Yet imperatives like Bundesen's rarely translated into meaningful support for women interested in breast-feeding, as Jessica Martucci, a historian of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of "Back to the Breast," a study of breast-feeding's postwar resurgence, has argued. By the nineteen-forties, most mothers were giving birth in hospitals, where orderly routine—babies in nurseries, bottles on schedules—often took priority over the personal attention required to initiate breast-feeding. Sometimes the discouragement was still more direct: into the sixties, some hospitals treated maternity patients with hormonal "dry-up pills."

Under these circumstances, mothers who wished to breast-feed were often obliged to figure it out for themselves. Niles Polk Rumely Newton, a Columbia-trained psychologist who wrote a popular mid-century child-rearing book, breast-fed her children with help from her mother, but she was troubled by the lack of official guidance. With her obstetrician husband, she devised a series of experiments based on research performed on cows, and she used herself as a test subject. Newton helped to establish the workings of the human "let down" reflex, a hormonal process that prompts the release of milk in response to a baby's suckling. Basically, a mother had to be able to relax. (A beer could help, the Newtons suggested.) "In the dairy business," a 1955 *Ladies' Home Journal* article on the Newtons noted, "the farmer's loss can be measured in dollars and cents; perhaps for this reason, far more research has been concentrated on lactation in cows than in humans."

Commercial infant formula from brands such as Similac and Enfamil took off in the fifties—a modern amenity that sat comfortably alongside Betty Crocker cake mix and Cheez Whiz. (Formula had also made it easier for women to work outside the home.) At the same time, the decade saw the rise of some of breast-feeding's most influential evangelists. The La Leche

League was founded in 1956 by seven Catholic housewives in the Chicago suburbs who wanted to create a forum for breast-feeding mothers to share questions and advice. La Leche occupied a tricky cultural position, at once radical and conservative: on the one hand, it encouraged women to claim control of their bodies and to defy voices of institutional authority; on the other, the intended result of this rebellion was a world in which a mother's place was unequivocally at home. Still, the appetite for practical help was ravenous. Within twenty years of its first meeting, La Leche had grown to include almost three thousand chapters.

National breast-feeding rates reached their lowest ebb in the early seventies, with only twenty-two per cent of mothers even trying to nurse in 1972. But a shift was already taking place. Feminists sparred with La Leche over its stance on working mothers, yet they, too, sought to empower women facing down the medical establishment. Countercultural currents produced a generation of parents more inclined to feed babies the natural way. In a "Sesame Street" segment from the era, Buffy Sainte-Marie, the singer and Indigenous activist, breast-feeds her baby while Big Bird looks on. It's "nice and warm and sweet and natural," Sainte-Marie explains. "And I get to hug him while I do it, see?" It was also an activity with the power to, among other things, épater le bourgeois. "Breast Feeding in Public a Growing Trend," the *Times* reported in 1973. As one woman told the paper, "Neither I nor my husband want to go out to dine and be faced with someone's breast. It's only happened to us once but let me tell you, it was enough. . . . My husband almost dropped his martini."

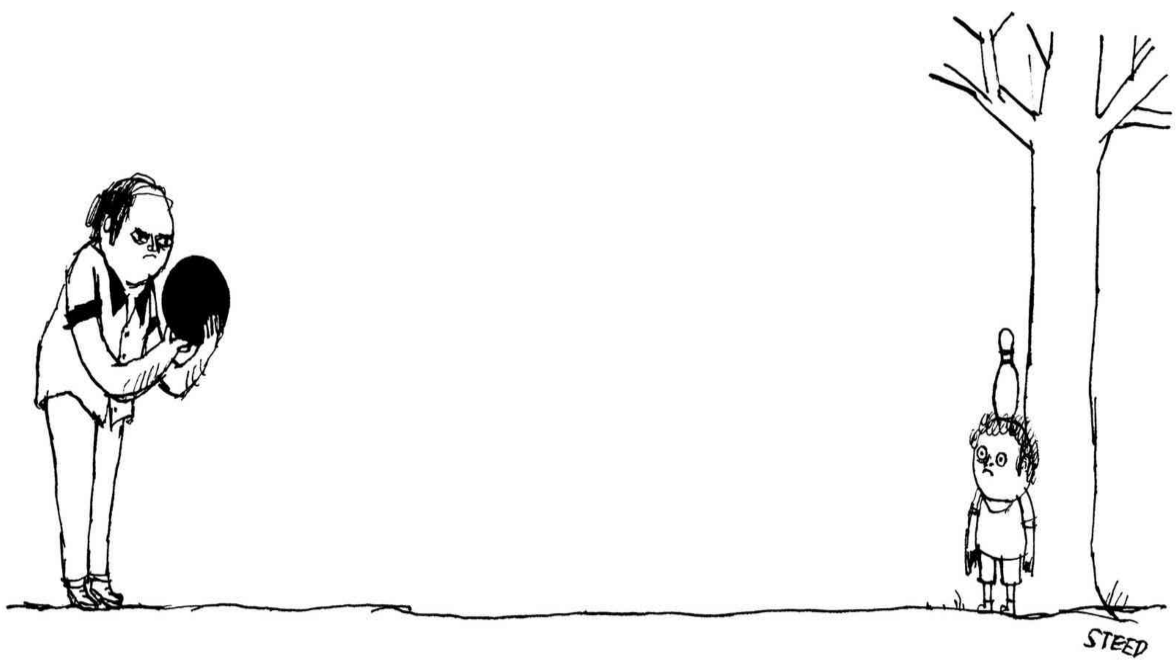
Meanwhile, the alternative to breast-feeding—formula—began to take on a sinister light. An industry that had presented itself as a best friend to mid-century mothers showed a different face in its dealings abroad. New reports linked Nestlé's aggressive marketing of formula to infant deaths in the Global South, making the case that the company's product had been pushed on families who lacked the resources (such as clean water) to bottle-feed safely. Instead of a scientifically perfected modern convenience, formula became "The Baby Killer," in the words of one influential pamphlet. A years-long global boycott of Nestlé ensued. In 1981, the World Health Organization adopted a resolution that aimed to ban the promotion of substitutes for breast milk. The U.S. was the only country in opposition. (Today, Nestlé stresses its compliance with W.H.O. code.)

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the debate over how best to feed babies, once a conflict between mothers and modern science, became a clash among mothers themselves. In one camp was the La Leche League: later editions of the group's guidebook conceded that certain circumstances might oblige a mother to work, but La Leche never abandoned a fundamental belief that "your baby needs you and you need your baby." In another camp were mothers who acknowledged other needs, like an identity outside the home or the money required to raise a family. The caricature of nursing zealotry came to look less like a housewife Madonna and more like Maggie Gyllenhaal's character in the 2009 film "Away We Go," a smug hippie professor who nurses her toddler and refuses to use a stroller because, as she puts it, "Why would I want to *push* my baby away from me?" The working mother's compromise might be formula, or it might be a breast pump—technology that became widely available in the nineties, and was embraced in the U.S. as in no other country.

Yet even as medical and public-health organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics rallied behind the value of breast milk and began to propose ambitious breast-feeding goals, women often didn't have the institutional support to achieve them. Anne Eglash, a clinical professor at the University of Wisconsin, a family physician, and a specialist in breast-feeding, offered the example of a nursing mother suffering from nipple pain who might find herself bouncing between a pediatrician and an obstetrician without getting any answers. The emergence of lactation consultants as a professional field in the eighties helped, but didn't fully bridge the gap. Government policy itself can undermine breast-feeding: when welfare reform pushed new mothers to return to work sooner, their breast-feeding rates dropped significantly.

In recent years, infant feeding has become yet another consumer choice shaped by advertising. A 2004 campaign by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Ad Council included a commercial in which a pregnant woman rides a mechanical bull. "You wouldn't take risks before your baby's born," the spot declares, before the woman gets tossed from the bull. "Why start after? Breastfeed exclusively for 6 months." A formula-industry lobbyist sent a letter objecting to the ad campaign before it aired, calling it "appalling" for the government to give mothers "a guilt trip." The polarized politics of breast-feeding have proved useful to the formula

industry and its allies. “Nearly 75% of US parents will turn to formula in the first six months,” a recent ad for the organic-formula startup Bobbie reads. “So why are we ashamed to talk about it?” In 2018, the Trump Administration opposed a U.N. resolution to encourage breast-feeding, in a move seen by many as deference to formula companies. A Health and Human Services spokesman offered the press an alternative rationale, suggesting that the Administration simply hoped to insure that mothers who couldn’t breast-feed were not “stigmatized.” But just because guilt and shame can be used cynically doesn’t mean that they aren’t real. As Martucci, the University of Pennsylvania historian, said, “All the intangible meanings of motherhood have been distilled down into the discrete biological act of breast-feeding your child. And so it carries this huge burden.”



Cartoon by Edward Steed

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A product such as Biomilq’s seems tailored to parents whose immediate concern is less about killing their babies than about failing them, and whose interest in breast-feeding is grounded in statistics. This is the cohort that reads Emily Oster, an economist whose data-driven approach to pregnancy

and child-rearing has made her an unlikely parenting guru. ("Let's start by returning from the land of magical breast milk to reality," one Oster passage analyzing several studies begins.) The relevant ideology here is meritocracy: a belief that you must equip your child for success by excelling according to quantifiable standards. And these standards seem to be rising. The A.A.P. announced last summer that it now supports breast-feeding "until two years or beyond."

Biomilq hopes to assist parents unable to satisfy this demanding ideal. "We're fed up with feeling guilty about how we feed our babies," the company's Web site proclaims. The emotional core of its pitch is a promise of relief for new parents' sense of personal inadequacy. "There are two factions in the world: 'Breast is best' and 'Fed is best,' " Egger said. "Everyone always wants us to pick a camp." What Biomilq proposes instead is an escape from dogma through technology, a Third Way politics of breast-feeding.

Biomilq has several competitors in the quest to cultivate human milk's nutrients in a lab. When I arrived at the headquarters of Helaina, one such company, I was hauling a tote that contained two hundred and ten empty breast-milk-storage bags, extras passed along by a generous co-worker. "You can get a lot of that stuff through insurance," Laura Katz, Helaina's founder, said as she ushered me inside. "It's not that much cheaper, but it feels good."

Katz gave birth to her first son last July, a month after her company moved into its current space, in Manhattan's Flatiron district. When we met, the logistics of early parenthood were still fresh in her mind. She told me that she'd recently been working on a database of baby gear that she liked. I thought about the assorted Google spreadsheets that I'd received, detailing the pros and cons of different diaper pails, evidence of a wish that it might be possible, with sufficient research and preparation, to get this whole baby thing right.

Katz, a food scientist, had chosen to breast-feed her son—logging hours with a nursing pillow, pumping during business trips—but her company intends to cater to parents who use formula. Helaina, founded in 2019, genetically engineers strains of yeast so that, when fermented, they produce proteins found in human breast milk. The hope is that these proteins, and the

tiny sugars attached to them, will aid immune-system development, in part by feeding the beneficial bacteria in the infant gut. The company's main lab, a glass terrarium of scientists in white coats, is situated at the center of the office. Nearby, in a room that smelled of bread and Clorox, batches of yeast were churning protein into flasks of frothy fermentation broth, which would be purified and then spray-dried to form a powder. Katz told me that the company was already capable of production at commercial scale. In facilities run by Helaina's manufacturing partners, spray-drying takes place inside machinery the size of a grain elevator. A sample of the end result—powdered formula in a bin about a foot deep—sat waiting in the lab; Katz would taste-test it that afternoon.

The relative familiarity of Helaina's "precision fermentation"—which is the same process used to produce insulin and rennet, a set of enzymes for making cheese—has helped put the company several steps ahead of Biomilq. But, to earn government approval, both companies face a daunting process. Becki Holmes, the founder of Foodwit, a consultancy that advises companies on food safety and regulations, explained that products intended to provide complete infant nutrition (that is, formulas) must clear more hurdles than other foods. A new product must, among other things, undergo what are essentially clinical trials, which can involve recruiting hundreds of babies to participate. "All of it is very expensive," Holmes said. "New innovators are almost discouraged from trying to enter or disrupt Big Formula. You look at what Biomilq is trying to do and it's a biotech-forward, capital-intense, huge-investment type of innovation work that could still be years away."

Katz and Egger each told me that they imagine approval will be a two-stage process, with an infant-nutrition product appearing only after less tightly regulated offerings. Helaina hopes to put its protein powder in bars and beverages to be sold by partner brands; Biomilq is considering supplements and toddler food, which it would deliver in 2025. For the company's infant-nutrition product, "we usually talk about 2028," Egger said, but these estimates flow as much from business exigency as from scientific reality. "Investors who invest in you in 2020 are excited to see a product come to market in five to seven years, not twenty-five years," she added.

Infant feeding is a "market that shows enormous stress and desire for change," Po Bronson, a general partner at the venture-capital firm SOSV and the managing director of its startup incubator, IndieBio, which focusses on life-science companies, told me. Strickland was offered a spot at IndieBio in 2019, and Bronson has remained interested (though not invested) in the field. "I think everybody in it knows it's going to be really, really hard and come down to lots and lots of details," he said. Bronson sees the potential for payoff in a growing global middle class. "The demand is great," he said; the limitation that looms is price. Other entrants in the field include a Singapore-based startup called TurtleTree and an Israeli company that recently changed its name from Biomilk to Wilk. Both are working on animal- and human-milk products.

That the global infant-formula industry beckons would-be disrupters is no surprise—it has been valued at more than thirty billion dollars. But defining success is complicated for a company that considers itself a "social enterprise," as Biomilq does. Egger told me this meant to her that the company's "dollars in" had to equal its "impact out": tilt too far toward prioritizing social good and you're a nonprofit; tilt too far toward business and "you're just a standard capitalistic for-profit company."

The distribution of human breast milk has traditionally taken place at nonprofit milk banks, and recent attempts to introduce commerce into this transaction have stirred controversy. In 2014, a company called Medolac, selling shelf-stable human milk, announced that it would expand its milk-bank program in Black communities in Detroit. The plan was scrapped after backlash from community groups and activists, who called out the company for its low pay in comparison with its pricing and for reinforcing historical injustice. (At the time, the company denied allegations of exploitation.) Biomilq seems keen to avoid any impression of similar obliviousness. Egger told me that the company has encouraged employees to read Andrea Freeman's "Skimmed," an account of racial inequities perpetrated by the formula industry. And even as Biomilq describes itself as "women-owned" and "mother-centered," it also notes that "lactation is not only for cisgender biological mothers." The company characterizes its work as environmentally friendly, too—reducing reliance on cow's milk to feed babies could theoretically mitigate the impact of a resource- and emissions-heavy

industry. (Breakthrough, the Gates fund, backs companies that seek to address climate change.)

Another question is whether customers will want to buy engineered breast milk. Bo Lönnerdal, an emeritus nutrition professor at U.C. Davis who specializes in breast milk and infant nutrition, told me that in the nineties his lab had produced proteins similar to Helaina's. (His team used rice instead of yeast.) He remembers that formula companies initially expressed excitement about the possibility—then decided that it was a "non-starter" from a marketing perspective, thanks to growing wariness about G.M.O.s. In recent years, the positive press for breast milk has leaned increasingly on science. But, even so, breast milk remains bound up in the most intimate parts of parenthood, which means that milk from a bioreactor presents a unique dissonance. Biomilq's efforts at "consumer-empathy education" have involved dozens of hours of interviews with parents, and Egger told me that she'd been surprised at the concerns they raised. They did not seem particularly worried about safety, she said. Rather, they wanted to know how the company would make sure that other parents continued to breast-feed. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Katherine Richeson's role at Biomilq.

By Beverly Gage

By Ava Kofman

By Jessica Winter

By Leslie Jamison

Classical Music

- Spring Classical-Music Preview

By Oussama Zahr

Performers such as the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the one-handed pianist Paul Wittgenstein famously expanded their instruments' repertoires by commissioning new works—a tradition that is alive and well this season. The flutist **Claire Chase** marks the first decade of "Density 2036"—a genre-redefining project to commission a new flute program every year until, yes, 2036—by revisiting eight previous entries and unveiling two new ones, at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall and at the Kitchen's Westbeth space (select dates May 18-25).

Also at Carnegie, **Alisa Weilerstein,** a cellist of depth, fire, and sinew, shares the first chapter of her own original series, "Fragments," in a production by Elkhanah Pulitzer (April 1). The **Crossing** and the **Philadelphia Orchestra** partner on the choral piece "Vespers of the Blessed Earth," which John Luther Adams, who pushes beyond musical clichés in his imaginings of the natural world, wrote especially for them (March 31).

The mezzo-soprano **Sasha Cooke** sings through her album "how do I find you," for which she commissioned seventeen touching, epigrammatic songs of pandemic life, at Merkin Hall (May 25).

In the world of opera, there are new visions of old favorites. Simon McBurney's special-effects-filled staging of "Die Zauberflöte" arrives at the **Metropolitan Opera** (May 19-June 10). The radical reinventors of **Heartbeat Opera** set "Tosca" in an unnamed, present-day theocratic dictatorship (select dates April 11-23). **On Site Opera,** which turns location scouting into an art form, stages "Il Tabarro" aboard a lightship, at South Street Seaport (May 14-17).

Gustavo Dudamel, whose appointment as the **New York Philharmonic's** music director has engendered near-ecstasy, leads sold-out concerts of Mahler's immense Ninth Symphony, simulcast for free in David Geffen Hall's lobby (May 19-21). Other feats of daring on the ensemble's calendar include Messiaen's sprawling "Turangalîla-Symphonie" (March 17-19) and the young pianist **Yunchan Lim's** début, in Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, a monument of the piano literature that won him last year's Van Cliburn International Piano Competition (May 10-12).

Bang on a Can's three-day Long Play Festival, in Brooklyn, spotlights contemporary music, including "Memory Game" (May 5), part of the eightieth-birthday celebrations of Meredith Monk—a composer and an experimental vocalist whose career shows that, sometimes, if you want pieces that advance your discipline, you have to create them yourself. ♦

By Alex Ross

By John Cassidy

Comment

- **The Republicans Begin to Eye 2024**

The Republicans Begin to Eye 2024

It’s been a winter of garish factional disputes in the G.O.P., and Donald Trump remains a seismic force of instability.

By Steve Coll



On August 6, 2015, Donald Trump appeared at the first Republican Party primary debate of the 2016 Presidential cycle, hosted by Fox News. Bret Baier asked all the candidates onstage if they would endorse the eventual Republican nominee, whomever that might be, and rule out running as an Independent. Trump alone declined, stating, “I cannot say.”

Come next August, another season of Republican Presidential-primary debates is set to begin, and candidate Trump is again a seismic force of instability in the G.O.P. Last week, the Republican National Committee chair said that, during the 2024 cycle, all participants in its televised primary debates should first sign a “loyalty pledge” promising to support whichever candidate is finally selected to take on the Democratic nominee—presumably Joe Biden. Trump has not indicated that he will sign such a pledge; last month, he told the radio host Hugh Hewitt that his support for the Republican standard-bearer in 2024 “would have to depend on who the nominee was.” Some of Trump’s most ardent Republican opponents feel

similarly; Asa Hutchinson, a former governor of Arkansas, who is considering joining the race, told the Washington *Post* that he has doubts about promising to back Trump if he becomes the nominee.

This has been a winter of garish factional disputes among Republicans, starting in January with the fifteen-ballot shouting match required to elect Kevin McCarthy Speaker of the House of Representatives. McCarthy's difficulties highlighted the power of hard-right extremists and social-media egoists among the fragile Republican majority in the House. Yet the context for that imbroglio was Trump's continuing grip on the Party's base, his legitimizing of the country's far right, and the institutional G.O.P.'s ongoing failure to hold him accountable for his lies about election fraud in 2020 or his attempted subversion of the Constitution on January 6, 2021.

Holed up in his gilded bunker at Mar-a-Lago, Trump might not appear to be the political force he once was, and he has clearly lost some mojo since the Republicans' disappointments in the midterm elections, which followed his endorsement of weak and extremist candidates in key races. By Trump's robust standards, his fund-raising since the midterms has been anemic. His love-hate relationship with Fox News has been aggravated by a lawsuit's recent revelations that Rupert Murdoch and some of his network's personalities seem to have privately thought that Trump's claims of election fraud were nonsense. As the primary field for 2024 takes shape, G.O.P. establishment figures are calling Trump a liability. "If we nominate Trump again, we're going to lose," the former Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan said late last month.

Yet Trump remains the top choice for 2024 among likely Republican primary voters, often by sizable margins, according to many national polls, including two released last week. Among other possible contenders, only Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, attracts double-digit support. And, although he and other high-profile Party leaders such as former Vice-President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are testing the waters, for now the only other prominent figure to have officially declared is Nikki Haley, who has served as both U.N. Ambassador and governor of South Carolina.

Of the undeclared contenders, nobody triggers Trump like DeSantis, who won a thumping reëlection victory last November and has become a star attraction for Republican donors. Trump's take is that DeSantis owes his political success to the fact that Trump backed him in the 2018 gubernatorial primary. If he is to be believed, DeSantis had "tears coming down from his eyes" at a meeting where he begged Trump for an endorsement, only to betray his mentor after he lost to Biden. These days, on his social-media site, Trump has been highlighting DeSantis's past support for cuts to Social Security and Medicare benefits (which the Governor has since walked back). "*HE IS A WHEELCHAIR OVER THE CLIFF KIND OF GUY*," Trump posted last week.

The DeSantis surge raises the question of whether, in today's G.O.P., only a quasi-Trumpist can defeat Trump. The Governor promotes his record in Florida as a model for the nation, and he has a lustrous résumé—Yale, Harvard Law, Navy service. Yet he has positioned himself as a fists-up culture warrior, choosing Disney as a foil for his anti-woke posturing and championing censorious laws in Florida to regulate the teaching about gender identity and Black history. On tour last week to promote a new book, DeSantis renewed his crusade against "the ruling class" and recounted for a Fox News interviewer how he managed to stave off liberal indoctrination at Yale. He recalled turning up on campus in jean shorts and flip-flops, only to experience "major, major culture shock" as he encountered "kids from Andover and Groton," as well as classroom discourse that involved "attacking God, attacking the United States." (DeSantis captained Yale's baseball team and graduated magna cum laude.)

Other contenders, including Haley and Pence, might try to run against Trump as unifiers, eschewing populist battle cries. In past Republican eras of orderly succession, Pence would likely have been an early front-runner, but Trump has excoriated him for refusing to go along with the January 6th coup plot, and he has lagged in early primary polls.

The R.N.C. might wish for normalcy and party discipline, but an unregulated brawl is the only kind of campaign that Trump knows how to mount. During last week's litany of attacks, he complained about the "Marxist Thugs" who are out to get him, by which he meant the federal and state prosecutors who have been investigating his finances, his intimidation

of election officials, his role on January 6th, and his handling of classified documents. He described America under President Biden as a “Third World Failing Nation” whose rescue urgently requires his *MAGA* revival and his restoration to the White House.

Our two-party apparatus of Presidential primaries—absurdly long, media-saturated, corrupted by big money—can hardly be justified as a model of democratic decision-making. Yet it does allow Republicans and Democrats to resolve their factional conflicts in the open, and it gives motivated partisan voters at the grass roots a say. The Republican primaries will offer an early measure of whether our constitutional system remains strong enough to expunge by democratic means the anti-democratic movement that Trump continues to mobilize. ♦

By David Remnick

By Ian Crouch

By Richard Brody

By James Lasdun

Crossword

- The Crossword: Wednesday, March 1, 2023

By Aimee Lucido

By Anna Shechtman

By Natan Last

By Patrick Berry

Dance

- [Spring Dance Preview]

By Marina Harss

Things are humming at **New York City Ballet,** where, in addition to its current resident choreographer, Justin Peck, the company is bringing on the globe-trotting Alexei Ratmansky as an artist-in-residence. Two of Ratmansky's works, the imagistic "Pictures at an Exhibition" and the rollicking sea-adventure ballet "Namouna, a Grand Divertissement," return as part of the spring season (David H. Koch Theatre, April 18-May 28). N.Y.C.B. also unveils a new ballet by the young Canadian Alysa Pires and another by Christopher Wheeldon.

In more good news, dance companies are finally touring again. The **National Ballet of Canada** (City Center, March 30-April 1), whose most recent visit was in 2016, returns with a triple bill that includes Kenneth MacMillan's 1966 "Concerto," coolly abstract and set to Shostakovich, and Crystal Pite's sweeping "Angels' Atlas"—dance's answer to C.G.I. A few weeks later, **Dance Theatre of Harlem** appears (City Center, April 19-23) in its final run under the leadership of the great American ballerina Virginia Johnson. (Worry not, the excellent Robert Garland takes the reins.) The company premières a chic new movement study by William Forsythe, "Blake Works IV," and also an ambitious dance-theatre piece by Tiffany Rea-Fisher, inspired by the life of the pianist and activist Hazel Scott.

As Kyle Abraham has grown busier, his company, **A.I.M,** has been performing dances by other choreographers alongside his own. At the Joyce (April 4-9), the troupe takes on a new work by a former member, Maleek Washington, as well as Bebe Miller's 1989 solo of female perseverance, "Rain." These are paired with Abraham's "MotorRover," an exploration of partnering inspired by Merce Cunningham, and Abraham's melancholy suite "Our Indigo: If We Were a Love Song," set to Nina Simone.

The **Martha Graham Dance Company** has also branched out to contemporary choreographers, but the must-sees at the Joyce (April 18-30) are two of Graham's own: a pitiless portrayal of Medea, "Cave of the Heart," and the early "Every Soul Is a Circus," a rare glimpse of Graham's lighter side.

In "Ahuti" (Joyce, May 9-14), the latest evening by Surupa Sen, the eloquence and the detail of the southern Indian dance form Odissi are

crossed with the energy and the amplitude of Kandyan dance, from Sri Lanka. The result, performed by dancers from Sen's company, **Nrityagram,** and from the Sri Lankan company Chitrasena, is a thrilling dialogue in which each dance style is enhanced and enlarged by the other. ♦

By David Remnick

By Nathan Heller

By David Remnick

By Sarah Larson

Ephemera Dept.

- **Loud and Proud: Black Panther Party Ephemera**

Loud and Proud: Black Panther Party Ephemera

At Poster House, an exhibition called “Black Power to Black People” includes graphic gems that escaped the fate of the wheat-paste bucket.

By Adlan Jackson



In 1969, the N.Y.P.D. arrested a group of Black Panther Party members in a series of predawn raids. Twenty-one people were charged with planning bombings across the city and assassinations of police officers. During the many months that the arrested were held, the Panthers fought back, in part, with art—posters, paintings, and flyers. The other day, a curator named Espranza Humphrey was inspecting a particularly psychedelic print in a storage room of Poster House, a museum in Chelsea. In the piece’s center was a black-and-white figure with an Afro and a yelling mouth. A spiral of yellow and red squares radiated from an outstretched fist, and fluorescent-pink letters spelled out “Power to the People” and “Free the New York Panther 21.” “One of the women accused was Afeni Shakur, which is Tupac’s mom,” Humphrey said. “She actually ends up representing herself while she was pregnant with Tupac.” The Panther’s public efforts, and

Shakur's jailhouse law studies, eventually helped secure the group's acquittal.

Humphrey, who was dressed in black, aside from red Nike Air Maxes, was preparing for an exhibition, which opens this month, on the art of the Black Panthers. She was joined by Angelina Lippert, the museum's lead curator, and Rob Leonardi, the exhibition's preparator and fabricator. They looked at the poster. Lippert, blond and bespectacled, flipped on a black light. The group went, "Ooooh."

Humphrey explained that most Black Panther posters—armed figures in berets and leather jackets, often in black-and-white with a single bold color—were printed on the back pages of Panther newspapers, or individually, to be pasted on telephone poles or pinned to bulletin boards. A black-light poster was rare, and had a different destination. "They're most popular in head shops, obviously," Lippert said.

People collected them. "The Committee to Defend the Panther 21 got money from really notable New Yorkers, like Leonard Bernstein," Humphrey said. "He put money into the pool for bail money."

Leonardi, who wore a blue shirt and nitrile gloves, had mounted most of the posters in the show in what he called a "plexiglass sandwich." "It reminds you that these are things of the street," Lippert said. To make the posters pop off the wall, Leonardi had devised a mounting system involving two pieces of wood, a table saw, fine sanding, and something called a "rabbet joint." He took the black-light poster aside and began stapling plastic archival corners to a plywood board and ripping acid-free tape.

"Very A.S.M.R.," Humphrey said.

Humphrey explained that the posters were a way for the Panthers to control their own narrative, in contrast to their hostile depictions in the mainstream media. "They knew this was something that wasn't going to be received well, even by many Black people," Humphrey said. "The reason why visual language is so important to the Party is that it can communicate to anybody. If I see somebody with a leather jacket holding a gun, I know that they mean business, and the business is Black power." She went on, "One of the Black

Panthers that I spoke to, she would host these puppet shows, and that's how she would introduce children to words like 'pigs.' "

Many of the Party's posters were stuck on public surfaces using wheat paste, making them ephemeral. "Wheat paste is like if you put wet toilet paper on the wall," Lippert said. "You're not gonna get it down." The posters that survived to be put on display in the museum were ones that hung in private homes or community centers. Most were borrowed from the collection of Merrill C. Berman—"*The* most important collector of graphic design in the United States," Lippert said.

Where did the image of the black panther originate? "A white rooster was used by the Alabama Democratic Party as a white-supremacist symbol," Humphrey explained. Black activists "decided, The way we combat this white rooster is to create, like, our own icon. A dove was floated in there at one point, and then they were, like, I don't think that's impactful."

The group looked at a few more pieces that were ready for hanging: a drawing of the Party's co-founder Bobby Seale bound and gagged in a Chicago courtroom; a black-and-white cartoon of a Panther in sunglasses holding a bright-red match ("That was another rallying cry, 'Burn it down,' " Humphrey said); and a portrait of Huey P. Newton, another co-founder, seated in a wicker peacock chair. There was a poster featuring an image of Angela Davis, who wasn't a member of the Panthers but did serve as an icon for the Party. Davis, as a Communist, didn't believe in copyrights.

Humphrey drew the line at using those images in the museum's gift shop. "It feels weird to sell Angela Davis's face on things," she said. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Fiction

- **[“How I Became a Vet,” by Rivka Galchen]**

How I Became a Vet

By Rivka Galchen



Listen to this story

Rivka Galchen reads.

When I say “vet,” I do not mean veteran. A veteran is someone formerly in contact with death on a regular basis. A veterinarian is someone currently in

contact with death on a regular basis. A part of me is moved to specify that not all veterans have been in contact with death, nor are all veterinarians so on a regular basis. But I'm older now. I know that many people experience such clarifications as weird. Weirdness does, though, generate uncommon strengths. Such was my experience with the suicide dogs, who, like most of us, were not what they seemed.

Joy is an ethical obligation. I was raised to believe this. I have not abandoned the proposition. Joy is the proper response to the gift of life that God or something has bestowed upon all of us day after day after day, and then at some point for no more days. Sorrow is an obligation, too, and a wonder and a necessity—but sorrow is joy's servant. My father is an Anabaptist. When I was in middle school, I researched the Anabaptists. That one made one's own path to God made sense to me, and that baptism followed rather than formed a spiritual relationship—sure. But too much of what I read made me think that this was a path through a five-hundred-year-old landscape that had since vanished. I came to the conclusion that my father had made an error. It was the wrong time period to be an Anabaptist, I told him. The sect didn't make sense anymore, I said; it was like pursuing dodo birds, however glorious. He said he'd keep what I'd said in mind. I believe he did keep it in mind. Though I don't recall many further conversations about it. My father, now seventy, was recently diagnosed with chronic leukemia. The diagnosis has altered his personality in no perceptible way.

My father raised me, all by himself, with great dignity. He was and is a practical man. He taught me how to put my hair in a tidy ponytail, he took me to buy tampons when that was required, and he let me work with him on his small goat farm. We had dogs all my childhood, sometimes two, occasionally three. Famously, dogs have a natural gift for the ethical obligation of joy. Our dogs, my dad said, were great role models. He was correct. It is very difficult, and also not engaging, to speak in detail about dogs I have loved who are no longer with us. I will not do so. I see enough death in my job.

Rivka Galchen on fathers and veterinarians.

That I could become a veterinarian, or anything that required extensive schooling, was a revelation in no way telegraphed. My first eight years of school could be summed up by the absence in my classrooms of any sense that joy was an ethical obligation. Those classrooms were not bad places; those teachers were not bad people; my own misunderstandings were the reasons that the settings did not please me. Some of the acts of imagination that we were called to undertake seemed too silly. For example, there was a man made out of cardboard who we were told "lived" behind the chalkboard—the cutout was stored behind the chalkboard—and we were meant to invite him out for our grammar lessons, by calling him by name three times, like a spell. On rainy days, we were allowed to play board games, like Sorry! and Battleship, both of which I found to be unreasonably aggressive. My father often told me that I made "errors of interpretation" in my sense of other people. He also told me not to worry too much about any of it. Then, in high school, or maybe a beat earlier, something abruptly shifted for me. As all my peers were beginning to go alfalfa, I started to grow as straight and fast as cat grass, and any piece of knowledge I was offered delighted me, and I devoted myself to mastering whatever came my way. I'm still not sure why that happened. Perhaps new gut bacteria, or the intervening hand of the most old-fashioned and personal sort of god. After years of nearly failing each grade (and actually failing third grade), and years of my father being called in for discussions with a series of teachers, each of whom wondered if I might be better served by a different kind of classroom, I was able to obtain a degree in veterinary medicine. This accomplishment gave both my father and me tremendous joy. But I knew not to rest on my laurels, because the way we move through time is by an accumulation of unexpected turns.

On Tuesday, I saw a cat who had eaten a lily. I saw a forty-pound poodle mix who had chewed through a bottle of Advil. I saw a vomiting St. Bernard, who was suspected of volvulus. Around 11 *p.m.*, an older man came into the E.R. with his male beagle mix, who had jumped out the open window of his truck while it was stopped in traffic; the dog suffered bilateral tibial fractures. All these animals were interesting and worth learning about and deserving of care, but I am going to tell you about the beagle mix. He had jumped out of the truck and off the bridge over the Arikaree Creek, on Highway 119. The dog's name was Ohio. His owner—that is the term our E.R. uses; we have had meetings proposing alternative terms, but for now

we are sticking with “owner” over “pet parent” or “caretaker”—said multiple times that Ohio was accustomed to driving with the window open, and that this had never happened before.

I didn’t believe this man; I didn’t not believe this man. I put a small Sharpie dot next to the detail in my mind. I myself don’t tell lies. This is a handicap. Once I came to understand how much other people rely on lying, I began marking unverified statements like this in the graph-paper notebook of my mind. This is essential in veterinary medicine, where people leave out all sorts of important, unflattering details.

I should say that it is twelve years now that I have been working at this veterinary emergency clinic, but it has recently been taken over by a new company. As a result, certain protocols have changed, and not all of them accord fully with my values. Still, working here suits me better than attempting to establish my own practice, which would involve a great deal of client management, design decisions, cute postcards reminding people about vaccines, and so on—I would be a failure. So I stuck to protocol and did not pursue more information about why, that day of all days, Ohio had jumped out of the car.

We X-rayed and bandaged Ohio and sent him home with his owner, along with pain medication and information about how to be alert to any signs of infection.

After that, I had to deal with a very sick parrot. I did the intake and the workup, and the parrot turned up positive for psittacosis. A strong memory I have from my time as a veterinary intern is of a shoebox being handed to a client, and my knowing that the shoebox contained a deceased parrot. It seemed to me a very strange protocol. But all protocols have a seed of strangeness within them, around which the protocol has grown, perhaps to protect and nourish that strangeness as much as to obscure it.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice
Listen to Rivka Galchen read “How I Became a Vet.”

I explained to the parrot’s owner—he said he preferred the term “caretaker”—that his parrot had tested positive for psittacosis. I wrote the

word down on a stickie for him, because it's not an easy word to hear. I explained the forking paths available to him, the poor outcomes that were likely, and indicated that the receptionist, Kelly, would be able to run a cost estimate. Kelly was eating a lemon Popsicle, but set it down on a napkin and began preparing the paperwork. In the veterinary E.R., almost every day has a walk-on part for sorrow.

I moved on to the next patient, a Shih Tzu with paw trauma.

A short time later, I was called back to the waiting room.

The parrot's human told me that he had researched what I had shared with him, and that his bird did not have chlamydia—that was impossible, he said. The bird lived alone.

The bird lives with you? I asked.

With no other birds.

The pathogen here is, yes, called *Chlamydia psittaci*, and the disease caused by that pathogen is psittacosis, I said. But there are many chlamydias—

No, he said, and his voice was loud, angry, and certain.

It is not the same as the more famed chlamydia variant—

The bird had no bird lovers, it was a solo bird—

As we spoke, Kelly was finishing her lemon Popsicle with her left hand, and tapping at her keyboard with her right. I had no more information to offer this human, and I said, I have nothing more to offer you. Then I went to the back, to the surgical section, to breathe and transition. Such encounters are very fear-inducing for me; I do not have a knack for "shaking off" the anger of others. I need that knack, but I don't know how to acquire it. I spoke to the father in my mind. In reality, my father was in Kansas and I was in Colorado and I strongly dislike speaking on the phone, but this father in my mind is kind and useful and a good listener, too. I told him that people are often unhappy in our waiting room, and that was an immutable truth. He said, Do you like working there, with all those sad people? I often pictured

you working more with the worried well, you know? Maybe on a farm. Remember when we met that sheep who was very sociable and not afraid, not like the other sheep? I often think of that sheep, he said.

I, too, often thought of that sheep. Knowing what I know now, I think that that outgoing-with-human-strangers sheep probably had a traumatic brain injury, or a tumor. I love my job so much, I said to my vision of the man who was an Anabaptist living in Kansas with a simmering cancer. And this parrot owner is going to try to separate me from this thing that I love most. This job, I believe, is the best use of me on the planet. I do have a small space in my heart held open for the possibility of xenobiology. But I love my job.

A benevolent listener might worry that I was overreacting to a single unhappy client/owner/caretaker. But the new management of our clinic, with its new protocols—unknown and shifting protocols—made me feel, and probably be, vulnerable. Maybe other instabilities were also at play. I am not going to argue that I am the best veterinarian of this century, or even in this Zip Code. But I am thorough and pragmatic, and I have a gift for setting distressed animals at ease—a gift not quantifiable. I communicate well with creatures that can't speak, including infants, though it was once suggested to me that infants are very drawn to people who wear eyeglasses, so maybe I am being prideful; maybe it's just my glasses. I am also good, albeit not exceptional, with run-of-the-mill adults. This is because, when I was in college, I followed around an obstetric nurse, April, who went to church with my father. An obstetric nurse lives in chronic extremeness: no matter how "normal" a delivery is, the day a human, or any animal, gives birth is an exceptional day. That is how April explained it to me. Every time she walked into a room with a new patient, she would say, All right, honey, this is going to be a red-letter day. And then, whatever April would do, she would announce, like, We're going to get this I.V. placed for you. Or, We're going to get this Pitocin drip started. We're going to bring you some ice chips.

You might think I'm repetitive and insincere, April said on our first break, sharing Cheddar Goldfish with me, but I speak the way I do for a reason.

I took note of April's use of "we," and the habit of speaking each action; this had an effect on the laboring women not unlike that of the more fantastical fictional scenes of communicating peace, or dominance, to wolves in the wilderness.

Everyone gets negative online reviews, my supervisor, George, told me, the day after the parrot person had written up a vicious review.

Yes, we know that, I said.

And customers expect miracles, which—, George was saying.

Is understandable, I was adding.

But we have a protocol here, as you know. Once a team member reaches a dozen three-star-or-below reviews within a twelve-month period—



"Oh, my God—Henderson's been redrawn as a woman."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Copy link to cartoon

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It should be calculated with percentages, not raw numbers—

I can see good reason in that, George said. Absolutely. But that’s not what we do. I’m letting you know simply that you are now one shy of this

number, and . . .

I felt humiliated by the conversation. Also, I felt that there was an error in it, a religious error. An error in how goodness was being assessed, and invited. What I said out loud was, We're going to improve this situation. In my heart I said, He doesn't know me. I am often unknown. I will help him to know me.

I don't fear death. I assume the other side of the door is O.K. In the lowest moments of my life, when I have thought that it might be useful to exit my situation more fundamentally—I assume everyone feels this way, at least briefly, at one time or another—it was not fear that stopped me from taking action. Death is a mercy, when it's time. That's how I was raised, and I stand by it, all the more so after years of bringing many a beloved creature across that greatest of divides. I feel like mentioning that I get consistently high marks for that service. I don't rush, I don't giggle, and I don't coerce people into sharing their emotions with me; I pay attention, instead, to the creature.

Working again in the E.R. the evening following the discussion about my reviews, I met, one after the other, two more dogs, each belonging to a different household; both had leaped over the bridge on 119, as Ohio had. It might appear that I am telling you about how my livelihood was threatened by poor reviews, but I am telling you instead something about dogs, and their special gift, and maybe what we, or I, can learn from them.

The first of the leaping dogs that night was a terrier mix. Terriers are deranged animals who could probably teach us a lot about how brains pointlessly track small movements and changes; these traits of theirs far exceed those needed to hunt small rustling prey. (My father and I raised a terrier mix whom we mislabelled as selfish—all she wanted to do was play ball—until we saw her sleep by the door for three nights while her dog sister was away at the hospital.) This terrier mix, Sushi, was seven years old. He smelled like skunk. His human parent specified that he did not usually smell this way. But the human parent reported not seeing any skunk after having retrieved Sushi from his jump over the bridge. X-rays revealed no fractures. His human parent then asked if they could go. I deferred to Kelly, who was again working the desk, and who is not judged by star ratings, since she is the person designated to communicate pricing.

Not long after Sushi left, the other dog came in: same leaping, same place. This dog had been on a walk. On a leash. He was a spectacular Irish wolfhound. He looked like the ghost of a horse; he looked like he had worked with headless people in a previous life and had not let those people feel ashamed about having no head. The wolfhound, whose name was Aggie, had tremendous grace and several contusions. He needed to be worked up for fractures—and for the mystery of why a dog generally obedient had gone wild. The owner, an older woman with a long braid, told me that she had thought, Is this mad-cow disease? Is this some kind of poison in the brain? Do I have mad-cow disease? Is it a climate thing?

As Aggie was waiting for X-rays, I worked triage. We had a sleepy cat suspected of obstruction; a cat with a chronic cough; a listless dog with diarrhea who needed I.V. fluids and a workup. A parrot was brought in, with reports of seizures; I could hear this being explained to Kelly. A parrot! Fear tiptoed clumsily down all the corridors of me. Then, when I peeked into the waiting room, I saw it was a different parrot, and a different parrot person. She suddenly gets stiff and falls off the bar, then lies on the floor of the cage, the parrot person said. She lets me pet her while she's there and she stares at me, like she's looking for help. Then after a few minutes she's well again. It's happened a few times now.

I did not intuit that she was lying, the human—she looked stunned, like a cow in a traffic jam. I mean that in a nice way; obviously, one doesn't side with the cars. Then she said, Why was a dog with diarrhea seen in front of a parrot with seizures and confusion? Dogs have diarrhea all the time, she said. As I tried to answer her, she began to film me.

So now I had exceeded my allotment of negative reviews.

It's not about understanding these people, it's about defanging these people, Kyle said to me. Kyle was young, maybe twenty-five. He was a relatively new vet tech with us. He had a cheerful iguana tattoo on his neck, and fingernails painted hot pink. He seemed fond of me, which I treasured. Avoiding making enemies has arguably prevented me from making friends —or that is something the father I keep in my mind has sometimes said.

I said I didn't believe people could be defanged. Some people have fangs and like to bite other people—that's the way of the world.

Kyle said he had a friend who was a herpetologist. He can walk through the woods and pick up all kinds of snakes that the rest of us would need to hide from. The snakes are still snakes, even venomous snakes, but he's not afraid, Kyle said, because he knows how to handle them.

I'm also reasonably good at handling snakes, I said.

Just take a deep breath, he said. When someone treats you like that, you just say to yourself, They don't know me.

My mind returned to the jumping dogs. To that inky point I had made when the first dog, Ohio, was brought in. Why had he leaped out of his owner's truck? Why that day and not another day? Two dogs cannot form a pattern. But three—three is not chaos.

Kyle suspected that the dogs were depressed.

Kelly said that she didn't think that dogs got depressed, that's just not what dogs were like. Sad dogs, sure—but no, not depressed. She said she had known of a cyclist who had died near that bridge and perhaps the dogs were seeing his ghost.

I said to myself, These three dogs—Ohio and Sushi and Aggie—are reasonable dogs. They are doing this for a reason.

When I brought up the mystery to George, the supervisor, he said I needed to focus on what and who was in front of me, and that if I incurred one more online bash—and it seemed to me almost certainly what that second parrot person would do—I would be taking two weeks' unpaid leave for sensitivity training and client-management skills and that even at the end of that training he could not guarantee me my position back, and he also said it would be best if I wore my hair in a bun, that it was too long to be worn in a ponytail.

A job listing came up at a horse farm about forty-five minutes outside town. It was a position for two days a week. I have not spent much time with

horses. Although their eyesight is partly monocular, and their visual range is so much more than our own humble hundred and eighty degrees, they share with us the specificity of a world seen from around five feet above the ground. When walking, we aren't too different. I shared this thought—and it was not unwelcome—with the woman, recently widowed, who had placed the job posting. She had sixteen horses and ran a riding school and had a very cluttered home. Very clean stables, though. She said that it was difficult when she lost her husband, but what haunted her nights was a horse of hers, spooked by a storm, who got tangled in some old rope left on a fencepost. What she needed was pretty routine care for her horses—care that had previously been done by her husband. Before I left, she went into her cluttered home and came out with a cookbook that contained favorite recipes from our nation's First Ladies, from Martha Washington through to Jacqueline Kennedy.

I drove away reminding myself of my skills—with animals and also with the human species. To the small puppet of my father that I keep in my mind, I said, So many well-meaning people and small-minded people, too, told me nothing would come of me, and yet here I am, replete with skills. How had this happened? And had I lost my way? Did I feel hopeless and like, if I were fired from my job, all that structured my life in a good and purposeful and meaningful way would be lost? I didn't feel like that.

But also I did feel like that. Acutely. I felt there was a very specific place for me in the world. A place that made sense for me, and that there were very few, or maybe no, other such places. I was less afraid of death than ever. And a weird feeling was growing inside me. A feeling that I had never *really* become a vet. A feeling that I had tricked everyone. I was no more real than that cardboard man obsessed with grammar who lived behind the schoolroom chalkboard. I was already dead, almost. The puppet of my father shook his head. You see, he said, this is one of the many reasons that I remained an Anabaptist.

The puppet of my father had a tendency toward oracular pronouncements. Was that his fault? My understanding was that this happened when I myself hit a mental block and could not see further. He was not perfectly reasonable, not even the real him that lived outside my mind. He had not wanted to take the medicine his doctor prescribed, because it had made his

feet tingle, and he had found that intolerable, and we had argued about this, and I had treated him as if he were a child, which was wrong. I had not made him happy, or well. I was failing the most basic ethical obligations. Perhaps I was no longer hewing closely to April's ways of being, the ways that had, paradoxically, by following them, allowed me to be myself. Too bad I didn't like myself much anymore.

I found I was right there. On the bridge! The one over the Arikaree Creek, on Highway 119. It was windy. The water was running high and brown, like melted Neapolitan ice cream. Was the water singing some song as it hurried forward so confidently? Sure it was. But its flow looked correct, from where I was standing, and looking at it with my eyes and no one else's. I wanted to see what the dogs had seen. I don't enjoy jumping. I thought I could scramble down the bank instead of jumping.

I was on the path set by the dogs. Though absent, they were my guides and role models. The mud had limestone bits, and dandelion and foxtail did much of the work of holding the soil in place. It seemed unremarkable, even as there was reason to expect something very remarkable down there, closer to the water. I had a giddy sense of expectation, as if I were going to see a gorilla give birth (which I did once witness). I felt that I was nearing a knowledge or darkness. It was a childhood feeling, which meant that I trusted it. There was a magnet, or a hole, or energy, perceptible to certain animals, and I, who felt myself to be an animal locked out of certain perceptions, was approaching it. It was muddy, and I was muddy, and the light of the moon was bright and loud.

You may not believe it, and I may not tell anyone. I learned something about those dogs, and from those dogs. They were not hurrying away from this world. They were not pursuing death. They were not deranged. They were not even melancholy. There was a smell. I could not place it. It is because our nostrils are too small and too close together that our scent location is so weak. So I lay down flat on the damp earth, with my face tilted upward. I tried to be as quiet as possible. I closed my eyes and concentrated and imagined myself to be harmless, even wounded, and I tried very hard to be as if I could rely only on my sense of smell. I tried to locate that scent as precisely as I could, wishing my nostrils farther apart from each other. I did not succeed at that. But what I saw in the root system of a bankside oak tree,

when I opened my eyes, was a collection of marbles, the marbles being eyes. What I saw, from down in the mud, was a crowd of minks.

A family, most likely.

What had made those dogs jump was the scent of those minks. You might call that scent the scent of love. It had been an error that those dogs had made. But an error of the heart, my dad said to me, there in the mud. So a worthwhile error. We have to make our own rules and our own judgments and not curse ourselves or others for the way we arrived in this world. Also we need to build a higher railing on the bridge, or otherwise devise a way to spare these dogs from injury.

That is what I wanted to share with someone. I couldn't tell my father, whom I often lied about—pretending that he loved me in a beautiful and flawless way. And that I loved him in a beautiful and flawless way. When I had last visited him, I found a piece of paper near his bed on which he had written three columns: Close Friends, O.K. Friends, and Not Friends. It was only eleven people or so, and half of them I didn't know. There was too little that I knew about this man, who had at times yelled at me and at times asked me to finish my entire glass of milk and who had let me sleep with the baby goats when I was afraid. Have I fulfilled my duty of joy to him? There in the mud, I began to. Though I had been a veterinarian already for many years, that was when I became, in the eyes of the minks and myself, a true vet. ♦

By Willing Davidson

By Jenna Krajeski

By Richard Brody

By Masha Gessen

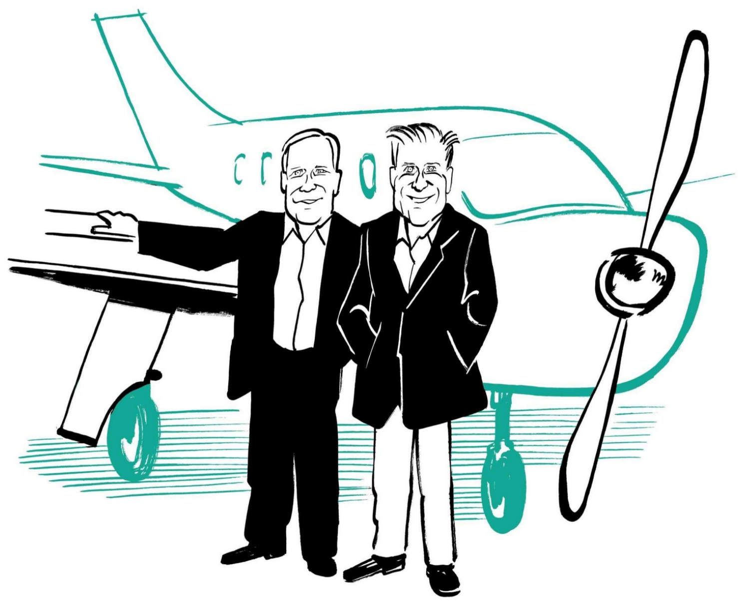
Hand-Me-Down Dept.

- **Zillow, but for Jets**

Zillow, but for Jets

The private-aviation market is down, so a wannabe oligarch tries out the Guardian Jet Vault 4.0 to look for some deals.

By [Adam Iscoe]



The private-aviation market has cooled since the pandemic boom time. Every rich person seems to be unloading the family plane. But it's not all bad news: often, the sellers are also buyers, looking to upgrade to something bigger than their neighbor's Dassault Falcon 900EX or Bombardier Challenger 300. The other day, at Teterboro Airport, in New Jersey, eight miles from midtown, a would-be buyer looked over some gently used merchandise.

His sales guides were Don Dwyer and Don's little brother, Mike, who arrived by air in their blue-and-white Daher TBM 700 single-engine turboprop. Conditions: significant wind shear, gusting to thirty-four knots from the northwest. Moderate turbulence. Don, who is sixty-five, was manning the flight controls. Mike, sixty-four, sat co-pilot, offering counsel: "O.K., Tiger! Ride 'em, cowboy!" After touchdown, Don said, of their bumpy ride, "It's like a washing machine!"

The Dwyer brothers grew up in Connecticut, working at their grandfather's business, manufacturing graphite molds—"Imagine a coal mine in a machine shop!" Mike said. Now, through their firm, Guardian Jet, they sell new and secondhand airplanes to a clientele that Mike calls "the .00000001 per cent." They boasted that, in 2022, the firm had bought and sold more than two billion dollars' worth of aircraft. Don stepped onto the tarmac wearing a bespoke suit and a Ulysse Nardin watch, lugging a "Block Island Race Week" backpack. Mike wore Lululemon pants with a blue Brooks Brothers sports coat. In the last week, Don had flown to New York, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Washington, D.C., and Bonita Springs, Florida, where he owns a house; Mike jetted to Missoula, Montana, where he demoed a two-million-dollar secondhand helicopter for a wealthy entrepreneur. On weekend mornings, the brothers like to fly their families upriver to Poughkeepsie, for breakfast. "We're goofy about aviation," Mike said.

"I love to say that by the time someone gets an airplane they have everything else," Don said. "Time is the one commodity you can't manufacture." Teterboro is a ten-minute helicopter ride from Manhattan. The brothers looked out at two dozen planes parked on the tarmac, a few of which they had bought and sold. "These are our children," Mike said.

Don laughed. "Our job is to find you the good one," he said.



"I made you a mixtape."
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

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“Our clients have no frame of reference to buy a ten-million-dollar airplane and be unhappy,” Mike said. “They buy a five-million-dollar boat, and it’s

gorgeous. They live in multimillion-dollar homes that are incredible. They can't *imagine* spending ten million dollars and being unhappy."

Don said, "It's all in the due diligence." He went on, "I flew to Dubai to look at an airplane once that had absolutely stunning pictures. I went to open one of the maintenance panels, and sand just poured out. I was, like, 'Rejection!' " He cautioned that costs (maintenance, staff, hangar space, fuel) add up. "Back of a cocktail napkin, you want an ultra-long-range jet? Three or four million a year!" he said.

The first thing the brothers showed the prospective buyer was the Guardian Jet Vault 4.0, an online tool—"Zillow for jets"—to help narrow down his choices. How about a super-midsize jet? Maybe the G280, manufactured by Gulfstream, a subsidiary of General Dynamics, which has also made nuclear submarines, M1 Abrams tanks, and the F-16? Two engines, two cabin zones, no flight attendant. Estimated value: eighteen million. "You could go to London, but you're gonna have to stop on the way home," Don said, almost apologetically. "Headwinds!"

Or perhaps an ultra-long-range plane? The men wandered into a hangar, slipped off their shoes—both brothers wore Ferragamo loafers—and climbed aboard a ten-year-old Gulfstream G650. It can fly just about anywhere in the world without needing a fuel stop. This one would go for forty million; a new model runs at least seventy-five. The brothers inspected the engines, maintenance panels, fuselage—"The paint is relatively new, the rivet heads are mostly still covered!" Don said—winglets, and cockpit, while the prospective buyer opened a few drawers in the forward galley: bottles of organic ketchup, small-batch hot sauce.

"Just think, you have a restaurant up here," Don said. Mike plopped down in an oversized leather swivel chair, which flattens into a bed, in the main cabin. "They'll withstand a sixteen-g crash," he said, of the seats. Don admired them, too. "This looks like an original interior, but it's not worn. Someone's doing leather treatments here, I guarantee it!" he said. He looked down at the carpet (worn, weird pattern) and sighed. "We're replacing this carpet." The buyer agreed to mull it over, and the brothers climbed into their TBM 700 to fly home. ♦

By Ted Geltner

By Patricia Marx

By Lawrence Wright

By David Remnick

Letter from Riga

- **How Russian Journalists in Exile Are Covering the War in Ukraine**

By [Masha Gessen]

On December 1st, TV Rain, an independent Russian television station that had been banned from Russian cable and satellite channels, was in its fifth month of broadcasting from Riga, the capital of Latvia. Most of its journalists had fled Moscow during the first week of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, dispersing to Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Israel, and elsewhere, only to discover in exile that, to much of the world, they represented a country waging genocidal war. Banks wouldn't accept them as clients, landlords wouldn't rent to them, and residents in Tbilisi and other cities painted "Russians go home" on street corners. Early on, two Baltic states were exceptions: Lithuania, which had long served as a base for Russia's political opposition, and Latvia. Last March, the country's foreign minister, Edgars Rinkēvičs, tweeted, "As #Russia closes independent media and introduces complete censorship, I reiterate Latvia's readiness to host persecuted Russian journalists and help them in any way we can."

TV Rain now had three studios—in Riga, Amsterdam, and Tbilisi—and a Latvian license, which allowed it to broadcast on cable channels in the European Union. Alexey Korostelev, who was hosting that afternoon's episode of the newscast "Here and Now," was working out of the Tbilisi studio, a generic space in an office tower on the outskirts of the city. Korostelev, who was twenty-seven, came from a small town near Moscow, and got his first job at TV Rain by winning an on-air contest in college. Like other journalists in exile, he had had to reinvent reporting, under near-impossible conditions: his job was to cover the Russian-Ukrainian war, but he couldn't return to Russia or enter Ukraine, which has severely restricted access for Russian citizens. Korostelev, who was accustomed to working with a crew on his video stories, had learned to cobble together recorded phone calls and a lot of narrative voice-over. "More like a print story," he told me.

Korostelev introduced a report about Sergey Safonov, the commanding officer of Russia's 27th Motorized Rifle Brigade, who is suspected of stabbing an elderly Ukrainian woman to death near the town of Izyum. Sonya Groysman, a twenty-eight-year-old TV Rain correspondent based in Riga, had been able to interview Safonov's bodyguard, a sergeant named Vyacheslav Doronichev. Speaking into the camera of a shaky cell phone,

Doronichev said that his boss and other senior officers had spent months "drinking vodka, and terrorizing local residents." He added, "They would cut off people's ears and fingers." Under any circumstances, an active-duty officer of the Russian Army testifying, on camera, to apparent war crimes would have been a major scoop; as a piece reported from exile, it was a striking achievement.

When the newscast cut back to Korostelev, an editor in the studio, whom Korostelev could hear in his earpiece, told him that the next segment was delayed. He had to fill more than a minute of airtime. Korostelev, wearing a yellow sweatshirt with a mike clipped to its collar, began plugging a tip line, which TV Rain had started for collecting first-hand accounts of the war; Groysman's report had originated with a message sent to it. "If you have any tips or witness accounts to share about the draft and the conscripts' experience in the armed forces and at the front line, and if you'd like to discuss the problems in the Russian military, then contact us," he said. "We hope that we've been able to help many servicemen with their gear, for example, and basic necessities at the front, because the accounts that we have published and that have been shared by their relatives are frankly horrifying."

Even as he heard the words coming out of his mouth, Korostelev wondered what had come over him. Help servicemen with their gear? Many of the people who had contacted the tip line were family members who said that their loved ones had been sent to Ukraine with little or no training, and without essential supplies such as thermal underwear, warm socks, or body armor. Korostelev had discovered that bringing attention to these reports often resulted in the men being withdrawn from frontline positions. He thought of this as one of his contributions to the antiwar effort: he was helping reduce the number of Russian fighters in Ukraine, one conscripted man at a time. He did not mean that TV Rain's work had helped provide "basic necessities at the front." But, somehow, he had said it.

In the first months of the war, Latvia issued about two hundred and sixty visas to media workers fleeing Russia, and nearly as many to their family members. Riga was already home to Meduza, arguably the most respected Russian-language news outlet. Now two dozen others came, including TV Rain, the Russian services of the BBC and Deutsche Welle, the Moscow

bureau of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, several smaller publications, and about half the staff of *Novaya Gazeta*, whose editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, had received the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2021. The population of Riga is roughly six hundred thousand people, and that of all Latvia is fewer than two million, so five hundred newcomers is "a noticeable presence," Viktors Makarovs, a senior foreign-ministry official, told me.

Latvia, like Lithuania and Estonia, was occupied by the Soviet Union for nearly fifty years. (All three countries joined the European Union in 2004.) About a quarter of the population are Russian-speaking ethnic Russians who settled there during the occupation and their descendants. Latvian authorities have long worried about the group's susceptibility to Russian propaganda. A former President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, whose wife, Ieva, serves as the digital-media adviser to the President of Latvia, has been an outspoken proponent of sealing borders against all Russians, citing, among other things, "a deep skepticism about transforming Russians who come here into non-imperialist democrats."



In Latvia, Anna Mongayt, TV Rain's creative director, has felt a sense of discomfort and shame, for being from Russia, for speaking Russian in stores and restaurants. "I'm always wanting to explain myself," she said.

The European Union spent much of last year devising ways to protect its media sphere from Russian interference. In Latvia, the measures were sweeping. The country banned the broadcast of some eighty television channels that were registered in Russia, and police cracked down on a black

market for satellite receivers that were used to circumvent the restrictions. It was in this context that TV Rain arrived in Riga: it was welcomed as an antidote to the Kremlin's propaganda, but it also encountered a distrustful public and a new set of laws and regulations that were enforced with existential urgency.

TV Rain, which is known as Dozhd in Russian, began broadcasting on Latvian cable last July—and almost immediately started racking up warnings and violations. Latvian authorities cited the station for failing to provide an audio track in Latvian, as required by law; for displaying a map of Russia that included the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula; and for its journalists' repeated use of the phrase "our military" to refer to the Russian armed forces. Editors at TV Rain told me that an illustrator had turned in the map so late that no one had had a chance to check it, but that the use of "our military" was no mistake: it was an acknowledgment of responsibility. To some Latvians, however, it sounded like a statement of allegiance.

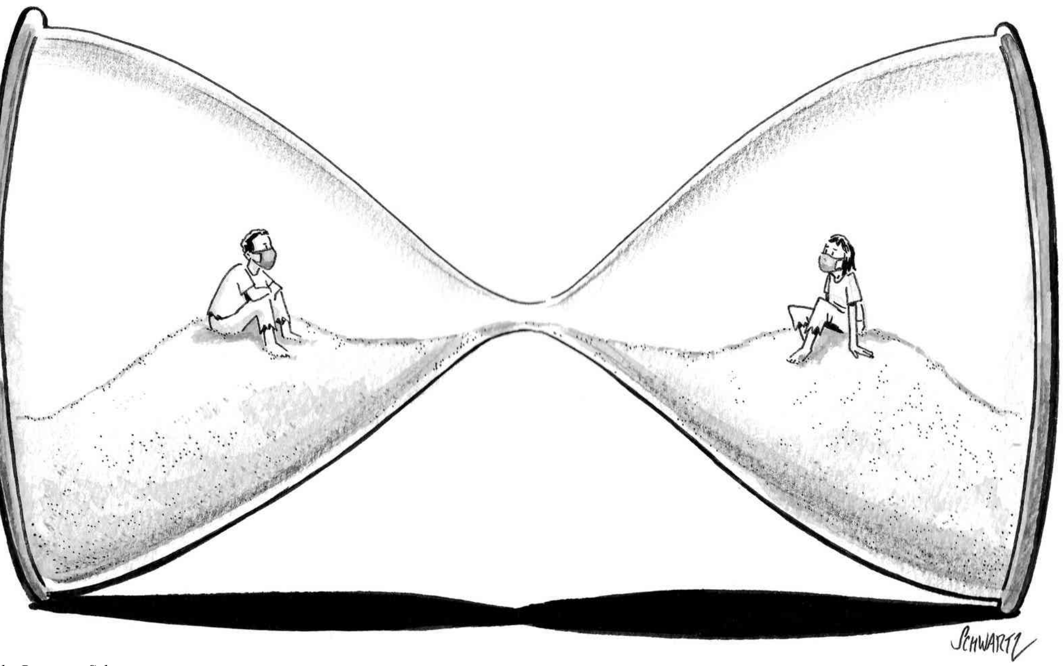
By the time of Korostelev's broadcast, on Thursday, December 1st, TV Rain was facing thousands of euros in fines. The following day, a clip of his slipup spread on social media. It seemed like proof of something many in Latvia had suspected all along—even Russians who claimed to oppose the Kremlin were secretly supporting its war in Ukraine. "So it turns out this was all part of the 'special operation,' " one typical tweet read. "This was a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Ekaterina Kotrikadze, TV Rain's news director, opened that afternoon's broadcast of "Here and Now" with a clarification and an apology. "The phrase used by Korostelev was factually wrong and absolutely unacceptable to the entire editorial team of TV Rain," she said. "We oppose Russia's war in Ukraine. We consider this war to be criminal and vile, and we consider the draft criminal and senseless. Our goal is to get this message across to every single one of our viewers, to as many people as possible. We cannot allow wording that may cast doubt on our position, and for this reason"—Kotrikadze swallowed—"we have decided to stop working with Alexey Korostelev, starting today." Her speech slowed and she appeared about to cry. "To all those people who have had to flee their homes, to all who have experienced Russian aggression firsthand," she said, "we ask for your forgiveness."

It was a flawless apology. But in the world of social media, as in the world of live television, everything is iterative. More clarifications and apologies followed—from TV Rain's editor-in-chief, Tikhon Dzyadko, and its founder, Natalia Sindeeva—with each subsequent statement sounding less apologetic, more defensive. That afternoon, Korostelev posted on Telegram, "Do I feel sorry for hungry conscripts who have been abandoned by everyone? I do. Is Putin a great guy? He is not. This seems to be the waterline. Do I help the conscripts? Only by reporting on them."

I visited TV Rain's studio in Amsterdam in late November, both as a reporter and as an on-air guest. I chatted with the makeup artist working on me, a thirty-one-year-old named Anastasia Pyzhik. I asked her how long she had been in the Netherlands; when she told me that she'd been lucky enough to "have a car and some gas in the tank" in the first week of March, 2022, I realized that it wasn't Russia she had left—it was Ukraine. Her parents were still in Odesa. Between Pyzhik's busy schedule—TV Rain was just one of her clients—and the frequent blackouts in Odesa resulting from Russian air strikes, it was hard to talk on the phone with them more than once a week. I asked Pyzhik how she felt about working for a Russian television channel, expecting her to say that TV Rain was not like other Russian media, that the people she worked with opposed the war. Instead, she said, "I'm just here to make money. I've had to overcome many things in these last months. This is the least of it."

TV Rain had a presence in Amsterdam because of one person: the Dutch media entrepreneur Derk Sauer, who moved from the Netherlands to the U.S.S.R. in 1989 to launch *Moscow*, an English-language glossy magazine about the Soviet capital that was modelled on *New York*. Sauer was a former radical student activist, a self-described Maoist turned war correspondent. *Moscow* folded after two years, but his next venture, an English-language newspaper called the Moscow *Times*, became one of the city's most popular and reliable publications. In 2005, Sauer sold his company, whose holdings then included the Russian editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, for a hundred and eighty million dollars. Still, he stayed in the country. A few years ago, at the age of sixty-four, he bought back the Moscow *Times* and turned it into a digital nonprofit. A Russian-language edition appeared in January of 2022, a month before the paper's staff had to flee Russia. Sauer moved back to Amsterdam, where he hadn't lived in thirty-three years.

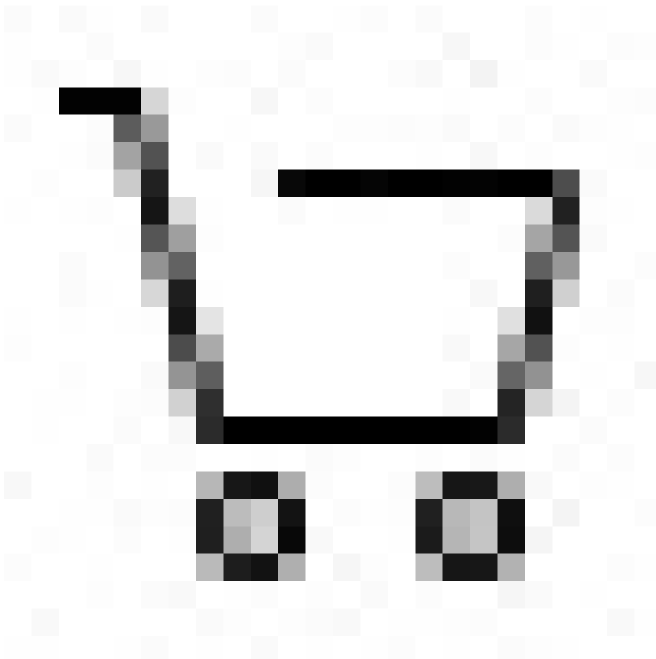


Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

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Before leaving Moscow, Sauer persuaded the Dutch Embassy to issue visas to Russian journalists. About half of the Moscow *Times'* twenty-five-person staff joined him in Amsterdam (the rest relocated to Armenia). The paper was cut off from the funding sources that it had relied on in Russia—advertising, subscriptions, events, and private donations—so Sauer proposed building a support network of independent Russian media, beginning with the Moscow *Times*, TV Rain, and Meduza. "Fund-raising is much easier if you come together," he told me. The group has been able to secure significant funding from what Sauer called "international foundations."

A Belgian media company offered to share its office space in Amsterdam. Sauer invited TV Rain to work out of the building, too. He envisioned it as a professional community center of sorts. "These journalists have been moving from one Airbnb to another," he told me. "It's so important for them to have a place to communicate with each other, to come up with ideas, and to party with each other."

TV Rain has a small studio and an adjacent room full of desks. A kitchen, which doubles as the makeup studio, connects to the Moscow *Times*. When I visited, Mikhail Fishman, who hosts a weekly current-affairs program, was recording his show. I last saw Fishman on March 1, 2022, TV Rain's final day of regular broadcasting from Moscow. Afterward, Fishman and his

partner, the Ukrainian-born journalist Yulia Taratuta, fled Russia with their four-year-old daughter, were denied entry to Georgia, spent a few weeks in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and then several months in Israel before landing in Amsterdam. The Amsterdam studio had recently been outfitted with TV Rain's signature pink lighting and a new anchor desk. Fishman hadn't realized that the camera would now see his feet; his black suède shoes looked worn and comfortable but not exactly telegenic.

Fishman originally modelled his show on John Oliver's: he is funny and knowledgeable, and he used his access to Kremlin insiders to mock Putinism. When the war began, he said, "it was time to stop laughing." He has since started to doubt his own expertise. "One of the first statements I made on air when it began was 'This is an unpopular war, and Putin has already lost,' " Fishman told me. "But the way the draft went down, the way people have submitted to it and gone to war when their chances of survival are less than fifty per cent—I mean, they are spending their own money on gear so they can be shipped off to be killed! I no longer understand."

It's increasingly difficult for Fishman to get anyone in Russia to speak on air—several of his regular contacts have been arrested—but when I was in the studio he was interviewing a Russian human-rights activist still working in the country. The conversation was peculiarly normal. Fishman's reporting methods haven't changed in exile, which makes his current feelings of disconnection all the more confusing to him. "In Moscow, I used to work from home, making calls and writing text messages, and going to the studio once a week to record the program," he said. "Now I do the exact same thing—and yet I feel like I've lost touch."

The media theorist Jay Rosen has written that the central claim to authority in journalism is being there—in the place of the action, where the reader or viewer is not. "Among the prerequisites for reporting to take its course is a shared world, a weave of common assumptions, connecting reporter to recipient," Rosen has written. "If that breaks apart so does the possibility of there being any journalism." In the absence of physical access to either side of the war, a sense of shared community with the audience is TV Rain's only path to journalistic credibility. But what makes TV Rain able to speak to Russians in Russia is exactly what makes it suspect outside of Russia.

Galina Timchenko, who launched Meduza in 2014, pioneered the model of reporting from exile. Meduza's technical and editorial staff worked out of Riga, while its journalists reported from Russia. That way, even if individual journalists sometimes faced intimidation and threats, the Kremlin could not persecute the publication itself. In 2019, one of Meduza's reporters was arrested on trumped-up drug-possession charges, but he was released after a few days, following unprecedented protests.

When the war began, Meduza had to get its journalists out of Russia. Twenty-seven people, several dogs and cats, one parrot, and one pet rabbit went to Latvia—their Riga-based colleagues picked them up at the border. Twelve more people dispersed to other countries. But Meduza has still found a way to report from Russia, using what Timchenko has termed "proxy reporting." Meduza assigns discreet information-gathering tasks to four or five different people on the ground; writers and editors in Riga then put the story together. "All our sources are now anonymous," Timchenko told me, "and all our journalists are now anonymous."

Meduza's readers in Russia have to use virtual private networks, or V.P.N.s, to circumvent the Kremlin's censorship. They read the publication for reporting on the war in Ukraine but also for practical information. After the draft began, in the fall, Meduza published a series of informational posts, with titles such as "How Not to End Up in the War" and "What Happens If You Fail to Report to the Recruiting Office." "We came up with this tagline, that accurate information saves lives, but now it really does," Timchenko told me. "We know there are millions of people in Russia who don't like what's going on. They are real people, and they are in pain, and we need to help them know what's going on."

Other journalists in exile said something similar. "Our short-term goal is to not let those who are inside and opposed to the war lose their minds," Denis Kamalyagin, the editor of Pskovskaya Guberniya, a long-embattled independent regional newspaper, told me. Kamalyagin, who fled Russia after the police raided his office and his home, surprised me by saying that he understood the Latvians who regarded Russian journalists as a threat to their security. "Is Latvia supposed to be thrilled that we come here, bringing with us the Russian secret police, from which we are escaping?" he said. "What if they start killing us here?"

Many Russian journalists seem to have settled in central Riga, which is tiny and dense with Art Nouveau buildings. Svetlana Prokopieva, a forty-three-year-old reporter for Sever.Realii, a news project of Radio Liberty focussed on the northwest of Russia, lives in the resort town of Jurmala, steps from the calm gray expanse of the Baltic Sea. When we met, at a café in town, she told me that she had chosen to stay on the coast because she wanted to make the best of her exile. Back in Russia, police had shown up at her house in the countryside, thrown her to the floor, and handcuffed her; another group of police raided her apartment in the city of Pskov, where her husband was staying. “It was clear that this was just going to keep happening,” she said. Her husband is still in Pskov, less than two hundred miles away—the couple discusses the weather every day, Prokopieva said, “as though we were looking out the same window.”

Her mother is in Pskov, too. Prokopieva sometimes struggles to convince her that the war is actually happening; her mother watches Russian state television and tends to believe it, as do many of her elderly neighbors. “It doesn’t mean that they are monsters,” Prokopieva said. “It means that their consciousness is altered.”

Because these journalists’ outlets are blocked in Russia, tracking audience numbers is difficult. V.P.N. apps make it impossible to tell what country a reader or viewer is logging in from, much less to get an accurate count of individual visitors. But most of the audience—perhaps tens of millions of people a month—seems to be living in Russia. For TV Rain, the second-largest number of viewers is in Ukraine. “When we were bombing Odesa, we had a local journalist on the air,” Fishman said. “She told us that, afterward, she got recognized in the street.” I noticed that he said that “we” were bombing Odesa.

Timchenko told me that eight years of working in Latvia had changed her and her staff. Following a number of internal crises, Meduza instituted an ethics code, a conflict-resolution committee, and a mechanism for allowing everyone on staff to weigh in on editorial policy. The publication has a list of words that should not be used and ongoing debates about other words, such as whether Crimea should be described as having been “annexed” or “occupied.” “Such discussions seem extraneous, but they are essential,” Timchenko told me. Meduza’s first major misstep, she recalled, was the use

of the word "*tyolochki*"—a rough equivalent of "chicks"—to refer to women, in a 2015 social-media post. "We had an editorial meeting that lasted four hours, and at the end realized that we are an international company and we have to apologize."

Timchenko said that TV Rain should have put its operations on hold after leaving Moscow, and then relaunched as a Western European media company. But the need to leave Russia while continuing to cover the war had made any sort of pause an unimaginable luxury. This, in turn, had made TV Rain prone to the kind of misstep that now had it fighting for survival in Latvia.

By Monday, four days after Korostelev's remarks, the TV Rain story was dominating Latvian television, including on TV3, a commercial channel that had been renting studio space to TV Rain. I watched that night's broadcast of "Here and Now" with a dozen members of the staff, including Sonya Groysman, the correspondent who had been reporting on the atrocities committed by the 27th Motorized Rifle Brigade. Groysman had persuaded two more of its soldiers to talk about the torture of Ukrainian civilians. One of them, Ayaz Yakupov, spoke on camera. "They did whatever they wanted with civilians," he said of his colleagues. "They made them hold a hand grenade with the ring removed." In the control room, a split screen showed TV Rain's newscast, live from the studio, and TV3's prerecorded program, with the TV Rain controversy as its lead story.

At one point, Anna Mongayt, TV Rain's creative director and that night's host, said of Groysman's source, "He must certainly be headed for trial." Groysman cringed. Such commentary would make it harder for her to get soldiers to speak in the future, but she understood that Mongayt was attempting to repair TV Rain's reputation. "I wish we could be asking big questions about journalism," Groysman told me. "But all we are ever doing is struggling to survive."

The last part of the broadcast was another non-apology apology from Sindeeva, TV Rain's owner. "Can one feel sympathy for the conscripts?" Sindeeva said. "Everyone decides for themselves. I know I do." A producer near me let out an exasperated sigh.

Mongayt, who was wearing a tight silver dress, left the studio around nine o'clock. She looked exhausted. She, her husband, and their two school-age sons had spent the last nine months living in exile, first in Georgia and then in Riga. After arriving in Latvia, she learned that most local families had been affected by mass deportations carried out during the Soviet occupation. She had come to feel a constant sense of discomfort and shame, for being from Russia, for speaking Russian in stores and restaurants. "I'm always wanting to explain myself," she said. "To tell people around me that I have nothing to do with the state that's waging this war—not the country itself but its government."

Two weeks earlier, the Kremlin had branded Mongayt a "foreign agent," a punitive designation applied to about two hundred and fifty individuals who annoy the Russian government. Both of Mongayt's parents are prominent figures in Moscow. Her father is a media executive, and her mother is the head of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. But Mongayt spent the first nine years of her life in Odesa, and still deeply identifies with Ukraine. The war, she told me, had felt "like an autoimmune illness, like one part of your body is attacking another."

Odesa had been shelled that day, and Mongayt had asked some of her friends to come on air to talk about it, but the city had no electricity. "And I know that, as a Russian citizen, I will never be able to go back there, will never again visit my grandparents' graves," she said. "It's like Odesa is a different planet, and rockets no longer go there." She caught herself. "Except artillery rockets."

Mongayt is not the only senior TV Rain executive for whom identifying as Russian is a conscious choice. Ekaterina Kotrikadze, the news director, is Georgian. When she was ten, her mother, a nuclear physicist, decided to leave Tbilisi, which had been devastated by civil war, and move to Moscow. In 1999, their Moscow apartment building was destroyed by an explosion. Kotrikadze, who was then fifteen, was in Georgia visiting relatives; her mother's body was never found. The Russian government blamed the explosion on Chechen terrorists, a security threat that Vladimir Putin, who was then Prime Minister, seized upon in his campaign for the Presidency. Independent investigations have suggested that the Russian secret police may have been involved.

After college, Kotrikadze moved back to Georgia to work as a journalist, then to New York to join a Russian-language broadcasting network. In 2019, she married Tikhon Dzyadko, who was a deputy at the network, and followed him to Moscow, where they both went to work for TV Rain. Dzyadko, now the station's editor-in-chief, comes from a family of dissidents. His grandparents were political prisoners who were freed by Mikhail Gorbachev; his mother is a human-rights activist and journalist still working in Moscow. In Soviet Russia and Putin's Russia, Dzyadko and his family were pariahs, but to Latvians he, like Kotrikadze, is simply Russian. "I have always known that I was Georgian," Kotrikadze said. "But now, when journalists ask me who I am, I tell them that I'm a Russian journalist." She and Dzyadko had both recently been designated "foreign agents" by the Kremlin. Kotrikadze told me, "I felt that I had finally been recognized as a real Russian citizen."

The next morning, December 6th, the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia convened to discuss the case of TV Rain. In the past, the station's executives had been invited to attend such sessions. This time, the council met behind closed doors, and by 9 *A.M.* had announced its decision: TV Rain was "a threat to national security," and its broadcast license would be revoked. Cable providers in Latvia had forty-eight hours to drop TV Rain —a loss of audience and some revenue for the station, but not a mortal blow. The decision also meant that TV Rain employees, most of whom had entered the country on one-year visas, would be unlikely to obtain more permanent status.

"I'd almost forgotten what it feels like to be an outcast," Valeria Ratnikova, a twenty-three-year-old news anchor, told me. I'd last seen her the previous spring, just after she left Russia; I'd sat next to her at a café in Istanbul as she told her parents, in Moscow, that she would not be returning. From Istanbul, she went to Tbilisi, then to Riga. Now she would likely have to move again. "At least I don't have to pack on an hour's notice," she said. "It's been great to be able just to go to work and come home, and not worry every day that your apartment is going to get raided."

This sense of safety came with a dose of discomfort: compared with the millions of displaced Ukrainians, not to mention the millions in cities shelled by the Russian military, Ratnikova was privileged. "I have felt I have no

right to complain," she told me. She thought a lot about another kind of privilege, too: Ratnikova has interviewed the wives and sisters of conscripts; she could imagine being one of them, had she been born in a different family and in a different city. "I see them as people, people who have never experienced anything good in life," she said. "Sure, there are some monsters among the conscripts. But many of them don't even realize that they're being taken to kill Ukrainians. This is no justification—as soon as they fire their first shot, there can be no forgiveness—but to me they are people, not orcs." (Orcs, the name of a population of malevolent creatures in J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, is the term Ukrainians have popularly adopted for Russian troops.)

Identifying with your subject and your audience is, under normal circumstances, one of the essential elements of journalism. Kotrikadze told me that TV Rain's troubles in Latvia "happened because we still own our sense of belonging to Russia." We were in a small conference room, where none of the more junior staff members could see her. Kotrikadze started to cry—and immediately stopped herself. "Why am I crying?" she said. "We are fine."

She meant that her city wasn't being shelled and her loved ones hadn't been killed—a litany that, a year into the war, no longer required articulation. Russian journalists in exile are constantly aware that they are lucky to have fled for fear of arrest and not in fear for their lives. They are lucky to know that their apartment buildings back home are intact, even if they can't return to them. They are lucky to be able to talk on the phone to their parents or siblings, who have electricity and don't need to shelter in basements. Kotrikadze resolved that in her weekly international-affairs show, which would air that night, she would not discuss TV Rain; she would focus, as she had for months, on Ukraine.

Since the 2014 Russian occupation of Crimea, TV Rain reporters and producers have spent a tremendous amount of time building relationships with Ukrainian sources. Now the biggest worry in the newsroom—more immediate than the worry about moving again—was that Ukrainians would stop speaking to them. A number of frequent guests had turned down requests to appear on TV Rain as a result of the controversy. Kotrikadze read out one response: "I'm sorry, but I'm in the process of moving to Italy for

the winter." Dzyadko, seated across from her, said, "We are in the process of moving, too—we just don't know where we are going. Sorry. Just kidding."

Less than an hour later, the newsroom went quiet. The nearly two dozen staff members present saw the same thing come across their screens. Sindeeva, the TV Rain founder and owner, had posted a video on her personal Telegram channel, tearfully confessing that she regretted the decision to fire Korostelev. This, as the staff came to learn, was the moment that the station lost access to officials in the administration of Volodymyr Zelensky. Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to the Ukrainian President, called Sindeeva's video message "a mockery made all the worse by the fact that we used to trust them."

Kotrikadze was still on the air when Dzyadko and a couple of other staff members got in a cab and headed to his and Kotrikadze's apartment, in central Riga; Dzyadko had to relieve the nanny watching their two sons, aged two and eight. He stopped at a wine store near his building and picked up a dozen bottles of Sauvignon Blanc. "I'll pay for this out of the corporate budget," he said, waving off one of the reporters with him. "We were planning to have an office holiday party, so we'll spring for a wake instead."

About half of the Riga-based staff eventually gathered in Dzyadko and Kotrikadze's living room. Timchenko, the publisher of Meduza, arrived, having flown back from Berlin, where her publication is establishing an office. The living room was large and airy, with blank white walls. A small pen-and-ink drawing of the Dzyadko family dacha outside of Moscow was propped against a window. A bookcase was half full. Familiar *Ikea* furniture—a wooden dining table, a plush armchair—shared the room with an open gym bag and a pile of clean laundry. One or two young reporters were smoking in the kitchen. Dzyadko and Kotrikadze's eight-year-old son came in and out, and no one told him to go to bed. At two in the morning, when almost everyone seemed to be drunk and repeating themselves, I left. In the doorway, I bumped into Andrei Goryanov, a journalist I knew from Moscow. "I'm the head of the BBC Russian Service in exile," he said, with a laugh that indicated the slight absurdity of his position.

The following Friday, the leaders of Latvian N.G.O.s that had been helping Russian journalists hosted a press conference. More than fifty reporters

crowded into an event space on the top floor of a Marriott Hotel. It was a sunny, freezing day in snow-covered Riga, but sweltering inside the glassed-in room. Dzyadko, who is strikingly tall and thin, looked even more pale and gaunt than usual. He had spent the past week on talk shows and panels, trying to defend TV Rain and its staff, with little effect.

Seated beside him was Sabine Sile, the former head of the media-studies department at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga. In the spring of last year, she had created a co-working space, with desks, computers, sound-recording studios, and a kitchen, for Russian journalists in exile. She talked about how she'd helped Russian journalists open bank accounts and get cell-phone contracts. She said that some had arrived with one hastily packed bag, that many of them needed to find schools for their kids and psychotherapists for themselves. "And we expect these people, while they are experiencing all of this, while they are also unable to stop work, to be heroes, to continue fighting against the war, and to make no mistakes," she said. "I propose we see each other as humans. We have common values, and they are the only things that will make it possible for us to survive this war."

As Sile spoke, the color seemed slowly to return to Dzyadko's face. Sile had grown so frustrated with Latvian authorities that she was beginning to think TV Rain's journalists might need to find another country to host them. "Maybe we just don't have what it takes to keep them safe here," she said. But, she went on, many of them don't have enough money to pay bills, let alone buy plane tickets, and moving again would be re-traumatizing for them and their children. "If we have a problem, we cannot push it on someone else," she said. "We have to solve it in Latvia ourselves."

TV Rain had settled into a familiar state of uncertainty. The team continued to work, as it had through a multitude of crises back in Russia, broadcasting on YouTube and on its Web site. Korostelev was banned from Latvia. Some of his colleagues feared that they would soon be deported. At the time, people close to the government told me that there was no political will to enable TV Rain staff members to secure more permanent legal status in Latvia. Some of their visas were set to expire in the spring. Dzyadko brushed off these concerns: "That's still months away! We just need to keep working."

Three days later, TV Rain learned that it was losing its office and studio space in Riga. By then, Dzyadko was in the Netherlands, meeting with Sauer. Sauer made the case for moving the entire operation to Amsterdam. It was more expensive than Riga, and harder for Russian speakers to navigate, but its residents were also less afraid of Russia, less suspicious of Russians, and proud of its nickname, City of Freedom. The mayor, the Dutch foreign minister, and the state secretary for culture and media had all visited Sauer's space and listened to him outline his vision for a Russian independent-media community.

On December 22nd, TV Rain was granted a Dutch broadcasting license. Dzyadko received a work visa to the Netherlands. He and Kotrikadze would soon be moving to Amsterdam, along with a number of other TV Rain staffers. It would be their third city since TV Rain left Russia, last March. Kids would change schools again. Family photographs would be propped up on new windowsills. But TV Rain's journalists would have jobs and electricity and heat. They would keep reminding themselves that they are the lucky ones. ♦

By David Remnick

By Keith Gessen

By Jon Lee Anderson

By Susan B. Glasser

Movies

- **[Spring Movies Preview]**

By Richard Brody

The lives of artists, whether real or fictional, inspire a wide range of movies this season, including the historical drama **"Chevalier"** (April 21), directed by Stephen Williams. It's a bio-pic about Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (played by Kelvin Harrison, Jr.), a Black composer and violinist who rose to fame in France just before the Revolution. Kelly Reichardt's latest film, **"Showing Up"** (April 7), stars Michelle Williams as a sculptor whose exhibition gives rise to conflicts with friends and family; Hong Chau, André Benjamin, and John Magaro co-star. In **"Paint"** (April 7), directed by Brit McAdams, Owen Wilson plays a TV-famous painter in a Vermont town who faces competition in work and love from a younger artist. Hilma af Klint, the Swedish abstract painter and spiritualist, is the subject of **"Hilma"** (April 14), directed by Lasse Hallström and starring Lena Olin (the director's wife) as the artist in her later years, with Tora Hallström (the couple's daughter) as the artist in her youth.

Sports and games provide unusual premises for new movies this spring. In **"Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves"** (March 31), the primordial role-playing tabletop game is turned into a live-action drama, directed by John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein and starring Chris Pine, Michelle Rodriguez, and Regé-Jean Page. Martin Guigui directs **"Sweetwater"** (April 14), starring Everett Osborne as Nat (Sweetwater) Clifton, who, in 1950, became one of the first Black players in the N.B.A. **"Tetris"** (March 31), directed by Jon S. Baird, is based on the true story of the effort to copyright and market the game, which was created in the Soviet Union; Taron Egerton, Toby Jones, and Nikita Yefremov star. Ben Affleck directs **"Air"** (April 5), a drama about Nike's recruitment of Michael Jordan to the brand in his rookie season; Affleck also stars as the company's C.E.O., Phil Knight, and Matt Damon plays Sonny Vaccaro, the marketing executive who engineered the deal. The bio-pic **"Big George Foreman"** (April 28) stars Khris Davis as the boxer, an Olympic gold medallist and a heavyweight champion; George Tillman, Jr., directs.

Among the most eagerly anticipated of the many family stories coming soon to theatres is **"Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret"** (April 28), an adaptation by Kelly Fremon Craig of Judy Blume's acclaimed 1970 novel, about a girl who moves from New York City to a New Jersey suburb.

Margaret is played by Abby Ryder Fortson; Rachel McAdams and Benny Safdie co-star as her parents. The realm of vampires gets a domestic twist in **“Renfield”** (April 14), featuring Nicholas Hoult in the title role of Dracula’s longtime assistant, who leaves Transylvania for New Orleans and falls in love with a traffic cop (Awkwafina); Nicolas Cage co-stars as Dracula. **“Polite Society”** (April 28), directed by Nida Manzoor, is an action comedy about a London teen-ager (Priya Kansara) of Pakistani descent whose parents oppose her plan to become a stuntwoman. **“A Thousand and One”** (March 31), the first feature directed by A. V. Rockwell, set in Harlem in the nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, stars Teyana Taylor as a formerly incarcerated woman who kidnaps her six-year-old son from foster care and raises him under a false identity. ♦

By Sarah Larson

By Inkoo Kang

By Richard Brody

By Evan Osnos

Musical Events

- Medieval Romances by Kate Soper and Richard Wagner

Medieval Romances by Kate Soper and Richard Wagner

"The Romance of the Rose," at Long Beach Opera, and Wagner's "Lohengrin," at the Met, both dwell on ancient mysteries of love.

By Alex Ross



No one has ever been able to explain exactly why Richard Wagner had such a shuddering impact on nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture, to the point where he became the subject of a somewhat unhinged international cult. Perhaps the most plausible reason has to do with the cascading power triggered by his command of music and words alike. The value of his literary output remains a matter of debate; nonetheless, his dramatic texts, which include the librettos of all thirteen of his operas, have a style indisputably their own, combining extravagant rhetoric with fail-safe narrative structures. Many composers after Wagner wrote their own librettos; few could match his furious double focus. Stephen Sondheim is the most conspicuous modern example, though he almost certainly would have hated the comparison.

Kate Soper, whose opera “The Romance of the Rose” had its première on February 18th, at Long Beach Opera, is also an unlikely candidate for the post of a latter-day Wagner. Agile, playful, quizzically erudite, she has made her name with such philosophically inclined music-theatre projects as “Here Be Sirens” and “Ipsa Dixit”—both of them self-referential meditations on the meaning of music and art. Romantic grandiosity and mythic gloom are foreign to Soper’s world. In some ways, she harks back to the medieval troubadour tradition, in which poet, composer, and singer were one. Still, she belongs to a Wagnerian lineage, however circuitous the genealogy.

In “The Romance of the Rose,” her biggest work to date, Soper turns to the thirteenth-century Old French poem of that title, which was written jointly by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. The original text is a sprawling dream narrative in which a figure known as the Lover, having become enamored of a rose, converses with dozens of allegorical figures, including the God of Love, Lady Reason, and Shame. Soper adds a male character named the Dreamer, who introduces the scenario, extracts the Lover from the audience (the role becomes female), and soon falls prey to emotional complexities. Passages from Shakespeare, Christina Rossetti, and Tennyson are also interpolated, though most of the words are Soper’s own.

The principal tensions arise from the irreconcilability of the allegorical observers. Soper’s verbal dexterity is evident when, in the prologue, the Dreamer enacts lulling the audience to sleep. The God of Love offers phrases from the original poem (“One can dream dreams that are not lies”). Lady Reason strives for scientific detachment (“Begin secretion of acetylcholine”). Shame spews corrosive despair (“The anguished lover finds no peace in the creeping night”). Each character is given bespoke vocal processing: reverb for the God of Love, a vocoder for Lady Reason, microtonal distortion for Shame. The three go to war over the Lover, but their identities prove unstable. The God of Love abandons courtly sentiments in favor of belligerent rants. Lady Reason, having got nowhere with a rational critique of irrational passion, becomes increasingly hysterical. And Shame ends up a voice of melancholy realism: “I am learning not to suffer / not to suffer mindlessly / and not to want to.”

Soper mobilizes the entire thousand-year history of music to energize the discussion. We hear troubadour and madrigal strains, Baroque arias,

modernistic sound labyrinths, punk-rock squalls, and torch songs fit for a Lynchian lounge. To execute the latter, Soper brings in Pleasure and Idleness, who vamp their way through an insinuating showstopper that rests on a four-note descending bass, in the tradition of the Baroque lament. The opera's disparate styles are bound together through motivic repetition and contrapuntal elaboration. At one dizzying high point, Lady Reason tries to demystify music itself—"In this continuously provoked expectation for something that continues to be withheld, you begin to experience a psychological frustration that you associate with your vulgar cravings for sexual consummation"—while achingly unresolved harmonies cast a subversive spell around her.

Soper's previous theatrical pieces assumed an extended single-act form; "Romance" lasts two and a half hours and falls into two acts. At the première, the pacing slackened toward the end of the first act, with an overamplified brouhaha taking the place of a true climax. The cavernous space of the Warner Grand Theatre, which Long Beach Opera uses for many productions, swallowed up sonic detail. James Darrah, who directed the show, struggled to keep pace with Soper's unflagging invention. The Garden of Love, where much of the action transpires, was strangely austere, resembling an apartment overrun by houseplants.

No matter: a vibrant cast and a virtuosic instrumental ensemble, under the baton of Christopher Rountree, brought the score to life. Lucas Steele, a star of "Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812," on Broadway, lent his nimble voice and sly charm to the Dreamer. Tivoli Treloar, a voice-performance major at U.C.L.A., radiated sophisticated sweetness as the Lover. Phillip Bullock, Anna Schubert, Laurel Irene, Bernardo Bermudez, and Tiffany Townsend animated the allegorical roles. I came away all the more convinced that Soper is a major music-theatre talent, one who deserves to have Wagnerian resources at her disposal.

The old wizard's early masterpiece "Lohengrin," now playing at the Met for the first time in seventeen years, draws on the same deep fund of late-medieval storytelling that brought forth "The Romance of the Rose." The title character is based on the Knight of the Swan, who first surfaced in Old French poetry and assumed definitive form in Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival." If Soper deconstructs ancient romantic archetypes, Wagner

burrows into their darkest corners. The opera that has furnished processional music for untold millions of weddings is an essay on the impossibility of marital trust—at least, when one member of the couple is a Knight of the Holy Grail.

The director is François Girard, who has staged Wagner twice before at the Met: a handsomely dystopian "Parsifal," in 2013, and a messily dystopian "Flying Dutchman," in 2020. "Lohengrin" extends the theme, with diminishing returns. The aesthetic could be described as European Netflix Fantasy. In the wake of an apparent astronomical disaster—the moon explodes at the climax of the prelude—the people of Brabant are huddled in a sort of giant cistern. Most are dressed in vaguely medieval garb, with red and green capes predominating. The challenge of this opera is rationalizing its sadistic premise: Lohengrin weds the distressed damsel Elsa on the condition that she never ask who he is. When Yuval Sharon staged the work at Bayreuth, in 2018, he exposed Lohengrin's cruelty and fostered sympathy for the scheming witch Ortrud. Girard reverts to stereotype: Ortrud is vindictive, Elsa helpless, Lohengrin staunchly heroic.

In the absence of ambitious direction, the cast had some trouble finding its footing. The rising soprano Tamara Wilson, as Elsa, seemed uncertain in her early scenes, although as her character's unhappiness deepened she let loose some room-shaking, Isolde-like tones. Christina Goerke, as Ortrud, powered through some silly stage business with characteristic feistiness. Günther Groissböck was a forceful but monotonous King Heinrich, Evgeny Nikitin an underpowered Telramund. Yannick Nézet-Séguin paced the performance smartly but let the orchestra blare too loudly.

Once again, no matter. This staging is essential viewing on account of Piotr Beczała's stupendously secure rendition of the title role. The star Polish tenor also appeared in Sharon's "Lohengrin," deploying his glorious voice to memorable dramatic effect; on this outing, the general theatrical vacuum seemed to free him to deliver a purely musical tour de force. Beauty of tone, precision of diction, crispness of attack, nobility of phrasing—nothing was lacking. The Grail Narrative, in Act III, gleamed like the object in question. Was it the words, the music, or the singer? Yes. ♦

By Oussama Zahr

By Nathan Goldman

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

Night Life

- **Spring Contemporary-Music Preview**

By Jay Ruttenberg

The coming months bring intimate club shows, splashy arena concerts, and one lightning-rod event that has already commanded attention from the Senate Judiciary Committee. That would be **Taylor Swift's** Eras Tour, demand for which overwhelmed pitiable Ticketmaster and, in Congress, suggested a new third rail of American politics: don't dare raise the ire of Taylor Swift fans. Those fortunate enough to surmount ticketing hurdles descend upon MetLife Stadium (May 26-28), where the millennial lodestar welcomes a slate of openers, including indie phenom **Phoebe Bridgers.**

The young and ticketless might find a sympathetic ear in their fathers, whose own version of Taylor Swift—**Springsteen, Bruce**—rankled fans by pricing his tour's tickets not for the world's workers but for its bosses. Onstage, however, Springsteen's repertoire excludes wrong moves. He steers his fabled E Street Band through Madison Square Garden (April 1), Barclays Center (April 3), UBS Arena (April 9 and April 11), and the Prudential Center (April 14), before looping back, to MetLife Stadium, this summer.

At M.S.G., hitmakers of yore dominate. **Billy Joel,** the Long Island yin to Springsteen's Jersey yang, continues his endless residency (March 26, April 22, and May 5). **Janet Jackson,** the rare pop Goliath to live within another's shadow, is joined by **Ludacris** (May 9-10). Over at Radio City Music Hall, the diva fledgling **Caroline Polachek** makes her bid to join the colossi's ranks (May 20).

For indie-rock connoisseurs, the season's biggest allure might prove to be **the Walkmen,** the resuscitated New York band whose reputation grows with each passing year—enough to land the quintet five sold-out nights at Webster Hall (April 24-28). Charmed indie lifers **Quasi** (TV Eye, March 16) and **Yo La Tengo** (Brooklyn Steel, March 18) show off new LPs, and **Feist** breaks a hiatus with an ambitious new production (Brooklyn Steel, May 13).

Throughout the spring, dynamite artists, representing seemingly every corner of the world, sweep through town. There is the knockout Cretan-and-Australian duo **Xylouris White** (Le Poisson Rouge, April 6), the august Mexican-heritage ensemble **Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán** (United Palace, May 20), and the Congolese electronic band **KOKOKO!** (earning its exclamation point at Public Records, April 22). And at Le Poisson Rouge,

on May 3, Seoul's **ADG7** (a.k.a. Ak Dan Gwang Chil) displays its sui-generis mishmash of shamanic ritual music and fluorescent pop—a Taylor Swift for some madcap, faraway universe. ♦

By David Remnick

By Sarah Larson

By Inkoo Kang

By Ian Parker

Our Local Correspondents

- **The Fight Over Penn Station and Madison Square Garden**

The Fight Over Penn Station and Madison Square Garden

How the effort to renovate midtown Manhattan's transit hub has been stalled by money, politics, and disputes about the public good.

By William Finnegan



Pennsylvania Station, in west midtown, is the busiest railroad station in the Western Hemisphere. It is also a shabby, haunted labyrinth. I was there recently with Vishaan Chakrabarti, an architect and city planner who has been involved for decades in efforts, most of them futile, to improve the station. We entered from Seventh Avenue, going down a narrow escalator with so little headroom that I flinched and ducked. On our left, a man was wrestling a baby carriage up a staircase, bumping step by step toward the street.

"It's the architecture that tells you where to go in a train station," Chakrabarti said. In Penn, the architecture generally tells you to go away. The area where we had entered resembles a dingy subterranean shopping mall, dominated by fast-food joints—Dunkin' Donuts, Jamba Juice, Krispy Kreme. Three railroads and six busy subway lines converge in Penn Station,

but from where we were it was hard to find your way to any of them. “Down here, the signage has always been a huge issue,” Chakrabarti said. His tone was equal parts earnest concern and professorial detachment; he was a professor at Columbia for seven years, worked as Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s director of city planning for Manhattan, runs a global architecture studio, and lives with his family about a mile from Penn Station, through which they are often obliged to travel. Chakrabarti is fifty-six, tall, with a well-trimmed white chin-strap beard.

Farther down, toward the platforms, there were more issues: cramped passages with no signs, wires spilling from missing ceiling panels. People slept on the floor, propped against columns, surrounded by their battered possessions. It was midday, off peak, so even the New Jersey Transit concourse known as “the pit” was not especially crowded. Later, passengers would cram into the tight, airless pink-and-beige space to watch for a track assignment, which would signal a stampede for a single escalator. “I’m always worried about safety here,” Chakrabarti said. “Very low ceilings and very congested space is a very bad idea.” In 2017, a Friday-night crowd panicked by rumors of gunshots left sixteen people injured. A few weeks later, a broken sewer line poured fetid water into a busy concourse.

How did it come to this? The original Penn Station building, a Beaux-Arts masterpiece, was knocked down in the early nineteen-sixties, after its owners struck a deal with a developer. The extensive rail operations below it were left underground. “They basically built this manhole cover and sealed up the station,” Chakrabarti said. We were in a dreary waiting room near Eighth Avenue. Above, on the manhole cover, rose Madison Square Garden, a twenty-thousand-seat arena. The arena opened in 1968, along with a bland new office block known as Two Penn. During the construction, hundreds of massive support pillars were driven down through the station, clogging the walkways and platforms, turning the whole place into a basement.

This entombment happened at a moment when many Americans—starting with Robert Moses, the unelected official who directed New York’s infrastructure priorities for forty years—believed that the age of rail had passed, and that automobiles were the future. Indeed, traffic through Penn Station had been declining since 1945. But the decline reversed, as ridership on the commuter lines boomed with suburban development. By 2019, Penn

was struggling to accommodate more than six hundred thousand passengers a day. All three of the region's major airports combined (J.F.K., LaGuardia, Newark Liberty) see only a fraction of that number.

The windowless, grimy ant farm of tunnels and tracks got steadily more crowded, unsafe, and inefficient—a long-running crisis that every political leader from the governor on down seems obliged to denounce. Governor Kathy Hochul called the station a "hellhole." Her predecessor Andrew Cuomo echoed Vincent Scully, the architectural historian, who said, "One entered the city like a god. . . . One scuttles in now like a rat." Occasional relief efforts have been mounted. In 2021, an airy new train hall, named after its champion, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, opened across Eighth Avenue, in a section of the old main post office, with touches of grandeur meant to evoke the original station. And yet the new hall, devoted mainly to Amtrak, serves less than ten per cent of the beleaguered station's passengers.

We made our way to street level, mid-block. Above us loomed the Garden, which is drum-shaped, mud-colored, possibly the ugliest big building left in Manhattan since the demolition of the New York Coliseum (a blocky monstrosity on Columbus Circle, conceived by Robert Moses). A vast L.E.D. screen flashed sports-betting ads at us. "You know, I don't really like binary solutions," Chakrabarti said. "I would love for someone to convince me that there's a way to fix Penn Station with a twenty-thousand-seat arena sitting on top of it. I just haven't seen a drawing that's ever shown me anything like it."

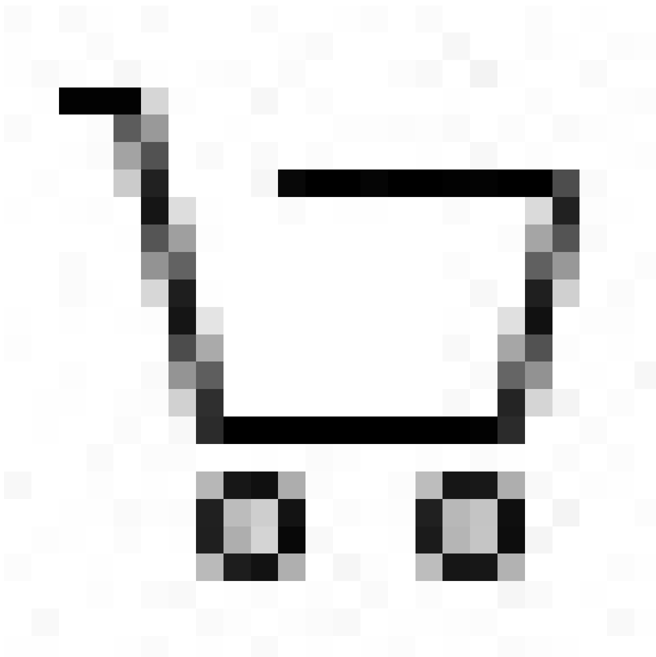


“And it was at that moment I realized that the only thing holding me back from culinary excellence was a bucket-load of butter.”
Cartoon by Anjali Chandrashekar

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Many New Yorkers have reached the same conclusion: Penn Station needs a comprehensive renovation, and the main obstacle is Madison Square Garden. And so, ten years ago, the New York City Council told the Garden that it had ten more years. The Garden's operations require a special permit, and the permit was running out in 2013. The arena's owners, the Dolan family, wanted a new permit to run "in perpetuity," and the Dolans, who pay no property taxes on the Garden—a little-known arrangement that has cost the city more than eight hundred million dollars—customarily get their way in their dealings with government. They own, among other large things, the New York Knicks and the New York Rangers, which play in the Garden, and no politician wants to be responsible for driving a home-town team out of town. But the City Council held firm, voting 47–1 for a ten-year permit instead. The *Times* described it as "an eviction notice of sorts." The permit expires this July.

The Dolan family's money came from the patriarch, Charles Dolan, who is now in his nineties. A cable-TV pioneer from Cleveland, he came east in 1952 and wired lower Manhattan for cable when virtually no one knew what that meant. He co-created HBO, lost HBO, and founded Cablevision, which grew into one of the nation's largest and most profitable cable operators. Dolan launched, bought, or sold a long series of companies, including American Movie Classics and eight regional sports networks. He failed in

attempts to buy the Jets and the Red Sox, but gained sole control of Madison Square Garden and its home teams in 1997.

Dolan and his wife, Helen, had six children and lived on Long Island—first in Massapequa and then more extravagantly in Oyster Bay. Their son James went to *SUNY* New Paltz and, after being sent to work for Cablevision in Chicago, slowly emerged as the heir apparent. James was nothing like his shrewd, soft-spoken father. He had substance-abuse issues, a terrible temper, and a more abiding interest in rock and roll than in business. His father, asked about handing him control of the family companies, once said, "Mostly, it was because no one else wanted it."

James was packed off to the Hazelden clinic, got sober, and, in 1995, became Cablevision's C.E.O. Under his leadership, the company prospered and shareholders were happy; in 2016, a Dutch conglomerate bought Cablevision for more than seventeen billion dollars. As a sports-team owner, however, Dolan has seemed to please nobody. The Knicks, who usually made the playoffs, started losing soon after he took over, and have since compiled one of the worst records in the league. (The Rangers also went into a title drought, which remains unbroken.) Dolan has been willing to spend on player salaries, but the Knicks have consistently failed to jell. He's approved bad trades, and has rarely held on to a coach for more than a couple of seasons. He clashed with Marv Albert, the Knicks' popular announcer, over his criticism of sloppy play, and Albert left the team. Even staid *Forbes* once called Dolan "the dumbest owner in sports." He's frozen out journalists who displeased him, and has had at least one fan ejected from the Garden for yelling "Sell the team!" At times, the whole arena has picked up the chant, only to be drowned out by piped-in music. (Dolan, through his representatives, declined requests for an interview.)

Some of Dolan's antics rise to the level of broadsheet news, but he most often features in the tabloids, where even the *Post*, which shares his conservative politics, regularly casts him as the quintessential heel—a silver-spoon billionaire with a mean streak and no clue. Most of the coverage he receives is accompanied by unflattering photographs, with Dolan, who is a pear-shaped five-seven, jowly and patchily bearded, usually looking both choleric and self-satisfied in his trademark long scarf in his front-row seat at

the Garden. There is often something vulnerable in his expression, too, which is only more annoying.

Legislators have had no more luck than fans in contending with Dolan. Proposals to cancel the arena's tax break have languished in Albany for years. The proposals' supporters tend to be the same officials who regularly call to relocate the Garden as a first step in renovating Penn, such as the state senators Brad Hoylman-Sigal and Liz Krueger, who represent districts that include parts of west midtown. Their inability to convince their colleagues in the legislature may have something to do with M.S.G.'s lobbying operation in Albany, which is known for being well funded and persuasive.

It also helps Dolan that he is not afraid to attack officials who offend him. During the 2020 election season, Representative Max Rose, a Democrat whose district included Staten Island, called on Dolan to sell the Knicks, "for the good of all of us, brother." Dolan immediately donated the legal maximum to Rose's opponent, Nicole Malliotakis, and urged friends and other N.B.A. owners to do the same. Rose lost the election.

President Donald Trump supported Malliotakis, too, and after the election she returned the favor by voting against counting electoral votes from Arizona and Pennsylvania. Dolan and Trump go way back. He and his second wife, Kristin, got married at Mar-a-Lago, as did their son Charles. After Trump withdrew a White House invitation to the Golden State Warriors, the 2017 N.B.A. champions, because Steph Curry said he didn't want to attend, Dolan wrote Trump's campaign a check for a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars.

But Dolan's most substantive political intervention, the one that New York operatives all seem to raise as a cautionary tale in the fight over Penn, came when Mayor Bloomberg set out to build a new football stadium on a platform above the West Side rail yards. Bloomberg's plan was to lure the Jets back from the Meadowlands, the stadium in New Jersey that hosts their ostensible home games, and then to lure the 2012 Olympics to New York. Dolan thought that the stadium would create competition for the Garden, which was a few blocks east of the proposed site. He also objected to the public financing that it would enjoy. So he launched a high-volume advertising campaign attacking the idea, and used his connections in Albany,

notably Sheldon Silver, a powerful legislative leader (who later went to jail), to block Bloomberg's plan. Dolan even stepped in and offered the Metropolitan Transportation Authority almost twice the amount that the Jets would pay for rights to the rail yards. The Olympics went to London. The stadium never got built.

"A*N URGENT CALL TO CIVIC ACTION"*—that was the headline on a booklet distributed for a talk at the Cooper Union, in late January. The event's sponsor was ReThink Penn Station NYC, one of an array of nonprofits and community groups dedicated to improving Penn. The complexity of the movement could be glimpsed on the sponsor's Web site, which proclaims, "We are no longer Rebuild Penn Station. . . . We're the visionaries formerly associated with Rebuild Penn Station." The confusion is only exacerbated by such organizations as the Coalition to Restore New York, which claims to have "united unions, businesses, nonprofits and voters" but is actually a super *PAC* launched by M.S.G. in 2021.

The event's first guest speaker was Lorraine Diehl, author of "The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station," a concise history of Penn and its demise. Diehl reminisced about wandering the station as a child, passing through the grand waiting room—the one where Farley Granger was pursued by police in Hitchcock's "Strangers on a Train." Next door was the formal restaurant, originally called the Corinthian Room. Diehl had saved a menu from 1951, when a shrimp cocktail was fifty cents. "It had such a wonderful sense of occasion to it," she said. Sunlight streamed down through the clerestory windows; it felt like New York was the glamorous center of the world.

In the late nineteenth century, before the station was built, the Pennsylvania Railroad was the country's largest business enterprise, with a budget second only to that of the federal government. Yet its tracks ended, like those of every railroad approaching New York from the west, in New Jersey, on the banks of the Hudson River. In 1900, ninety million passengers were obliged to transfer to ferries to reach Manhattan.

And so the Pennsylvania built, simultaneously, a pair of tunnels under the Hudson, four more under the East River (to connect to the Long Island Railroad, which it also owned), and its monumental station in the West Thirties, at a cost of more than a hundred million 1910 dollars, according to

“Conquering Gotham,” by Jill Jonnes. The station, designed by Charles McKim, of McKim, Mead & White, with inspiration from the ancient Roman Baths of Caracalla, was the fourth-largest building on earth. Its main waiting room, panelled in Italian travertine, with fluted columns and coffered ceilings a hundred and fifty feet high, was the world’s largest room. The train shed was equally grand, with arching steel girders, staggered mezzanines, and glass-block floors that let sunlight through to the tracks. On opening day, a hundred thousand people came to see the station. The *Times* reported, “As the crowd passed through the doors into the vast concourse, on every hand were heard exclamations of wonder.”

The Pennsylvania’s archrival, the New York Central Railroad, enjoyed an easier route into Manhattan, coming in from the north over no significant body of water and gliding under Park Avenue at a negligible grade into its great station, Grand Central. Its owners, the Vanderbilt family, cultivated the East Side neighborhood around their depot, which was called Terminal City. Office towers sprouted nearby, and white-collar commuters could walk to their jobs.

Penn Station was more of a fortress, walled off from its neighbors by its grandeur, and, perhaps, by some Philadelphian distaste for the mean streets of New York. The railroad encouraged the construction of the main post office across Eighth (a money-maker for the company, which carried much of the mail), and it built the Hotel Pennsylvania, across Seventh, but otherwise it remained somewhat aloof from the city.

As hard financial times hit the railroads after the Second World War, both of the great New York stations deteriorated, but the vultures came for Penn first. The demolition aroused protests, mainly by architects, against what Moynihan called an “act of vandalism.” The failure of their efforts inspired the architectural-preservation movement. The city, over fierce opposition from real-estate developers, passed a law in 1965 to protect historic buildings. When a development scheme threatened Grand Central in the late sixties, the legal battle went all the way to the Supreme Court, and the station was saved.

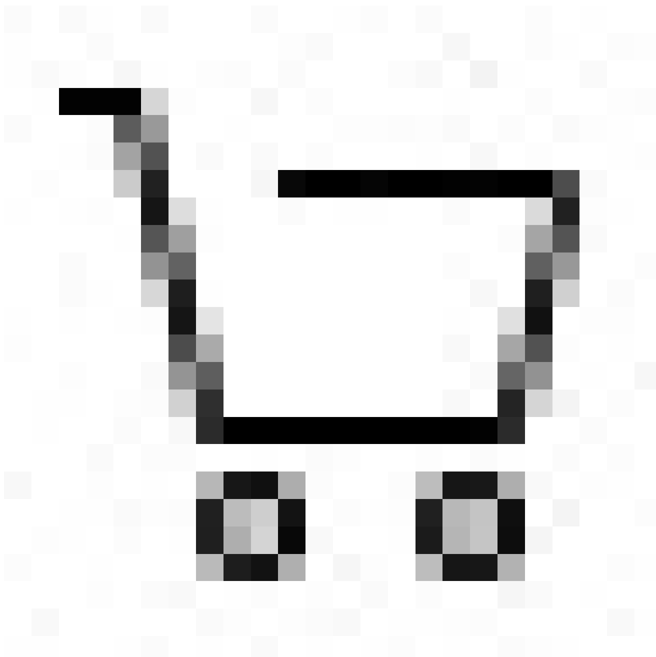


"How does it make you feel when people don't wave back?"
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

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After its near-death, Grand Central was refurbished, and investment poured in. Dozens of restaurants, bookstores, shops, bars, and delis filled the halls and balconies. The station, with its celestial ceiling mural, is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in the city, and that's not counting the hordes who trundle through on trains and subways. "You say, 'Let's get a drink at Grand Central,' " Chakrabarti told me. "Nobody says that about Penn Station." Chakrabarti's firm, Practice for Architecture and Urbanism, has an office near Union Square. "We could pay a lower office rent near Penn, but nobody wants to travel through the station."

In the debates over Penn Station, there is always a tidal pull back toward the station that was lost. That's what ReThink Penn Station NYC has in mind: rebuild it, perhaps with slightly less expensive travertine and a few modern touches. But traffic through the station today is much heavier than it was in 1910, and it's predominantly commuters—the relatively few intercity trains are now being handled at Moynihan. The station needs to be rethought in order to move people through quickly, safely, and, if possible, painlessly. The fundamental problem of the shabby neighborhood will not be addressed with another colonnaded fortress. Then, of course, there's the Garden, crushing the station.

The Madison Square Garden that sits atop Penn is the fourth building to bear that name. The first two were constructed near Madison Square Park—in 1879, for P. T. Barnum, and in 1890, for Barnum and a group of tycoons that included Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan. The third went up in Hell's Kitchen, in 1925. This record of impermanence may explain why the businessman Irving Felt, who moved the Garden to its present site in 1968, showed little concern for the grand old station that he was demolishing. "Fifty years from now, when it's time for our Center to be torn down, there will be a new group of architects who will protest," he said.

In fact, no known architect will mourn the loss of this ten-story trash can. In 2013, after the Garden's operating permit was limited to ten years, the Municipal Art Society asked four top architecture firms to design a new Penn Station. Each rendering was more fantastical than the last. One featured what looked to be an open-air stadium of greenery floating above a transparent ticket hall. All removed the Garden, some with greater care than others—one proposed extending the High Line, the elevated park on the West Side, to connect the rebuilt station with a new arena a couple of blocks away. A partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill called the Garden "a sideshow." Vin Cipolla, president of the Municipal Art Society, was more pro-Garden. "A world-class city needs a world-class train station," he said. "But it also needs a world-class venue."

The Garden, it must be said, has nearly left its perch atop the station more than once. In 1987, plans were announced to build a new arena between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues, next to the Jacob Javits Convention Center. The old place would be knocked down as soon as the new one was ready. That never happened, of course. The projected costs grew to hundreds of millions of dollars, and those involved lost interest.

Two decades later, Governor Eliot Spitzer got behind another plan: to move the Garden one block west, into a giant unused space at the back of the old post office. Spitzer came from a wealthy New York real-estate family, and, according to Chakrabarti, who worked on the plan, "he understood the natural logic of it and how it would eventually pay for itself." There were plenty of differences between the parties—Dolan wanted to put neon signs on the building's Corinthian columns, and was impatient to see the money—but Spitzer, who once described himself as a "fucking steamroller," kept

pushing. The Garden actually signed a memorandum of understanding with developers. Then Spitzer self-destructed in a prostitution scandal, and M.S.G. proceeded to Plan B, which was an expensive renovation of the increasingly shoddy arena.

In 2016, the *Times*, taking an unusual step into the middle of a municipal power struggle, commissioned Chakrabarti to come up with a new plan. The near-miss with the post office had left him hopeful about the possibility of compromise. "Yes, the Dolans own that land, so they have a lot to say about what happens to that land—it's a horrible historical fact," he told me. "But they got out of their own way in 2008. They can do it again."

Chakrabarti's design was an ambitious example of "adaptive reuse." Rather than tear down the Garden, he proposed stripping off the "unsightly concrete cladding" of the exterior and replacing it with a "double skin" of blastproof glass, leaving the elegant steel superstructure in place. The result would be a light-flooded station, with ceilings lifted to a hundred and fifty-three feet and the egregious support columns of the old arena rendered unnecessary.

"There are two hundred and sixty-one columns that we think we can remove," Chakrabarti told me, as we walked through Penn. We were making our way west along a platform, edging past thick columns, some of which were perilously close to the edge. "If you're in a wheelchair, you've got a rolling bag, a kid in a stroller . . ." He didn't need to finish the thought.

The recycling of the Garden's skeleton would keep costs relatively low, with less construction work and minimal track closures. To build an entirely new station, he said, "would be like doing open-heart surgery on a running patient." His own plan, though, required a profound transformation of the space that remained. Chakrabarti wanted to remove not just the arena but also the cramped concourse levels above us, which had been built to replace what he calls the "old, lacy mezzanines that hovered over the tracks." Those mezzanines, with their glass-block floors, had worked well, and could again. He pointed into the blackness of the rafters. "Imagine looking all the way up from here," he said. "You would be looking at blue sky."

The projected improvements under Chakrabarti's plan—in safety, efficiency, capacity, the traveller's experience, and the neighborhood's attractiveness

and property values—seemed enormous. His ideas got a positive response from major stakeholders, including the neighborhood community board, which voted unanimously in favor of the proposal.

Chakrabarti met with state officials and a senior executive from M.S.G. to discuss the design. But nothing came of it. Michael Kimmelman, the architecture critic for the *Times*, described Chakrabarti's plan as a "provocation." The provocatee was presumably Governor Andrew Cuomo—the only person powerful and belligerent enough to compel all the necessary players to work together.

One sometimes hears the lament that we need another Robert Moses—someone who can get big things done. Marc Dunkelman, a research fellow in public affairs at Brown, notes that the last major infrastructure project completed in New York City was the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. That was in 1964. Around that time, Dunkelman says, the left began to reconsider a central tenet of old-guard progressivism: that government could improve ordinary people's lives. This faith now had to contend with a broad-based mistrust of government—a development that he links, at least in New York, to the abuses of power committed by Moses, such as the destruction of South Bronx neighborhoods during the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

In New York, decision-making authority over public projects was dispersed, with the advent of new agencies, new regulations, new requirements for community and environmental review. These reforms, all well intentioned, have had the effect of spreading veto power over any given infrastructure project to a baffling array of institutions and individuals. As Dunkelman once put it, "Everyone is so powerful that anyone can kill it." A highway-tunnel project called Westway, which would have transformed the Hudson waterfront in Manhattan into a car-free zone, at virtually no cost to the city, was cancelled in 1985, for reasons that look picayune in retrospect. Among them was a legal squabble over an environmental review in which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers understated the possible impact on striped-bass habitat.

Dunkelman believes that the renovation of Penn Station might once have been more straightforward: "In the old days, they would just eminent-

domain the Garden. Pay the guy, stop playing footsie, get it done." But paying off Dolan would elicit outrage, he said: "Think how angry people would be. This guy who has ruined the Knicks and the Rangers now gets billions? Nobody has the power to make that deal stick."

Actually, Eliot Spitzer nearly did, and so did Andrew Cuomo. In the peculiar power structure of New York, the governor, sitting in Albany, has more influence over the city's mass-transit systems than the mayor does, including effective control over the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Cuomo, who became governor in 2011, had his full measure of flaws, but he was serious about infrastructure. He drove an eight-billion-dollar renovation of LaGuardia Airport. He replaced the Tappan Zee Bridge, and rebuilt the Kosciuszko. He opened the first few stops on the Second Avenue subway line, where construction had been stalled for generations. He also completed Moynihan Train Hall, another long-stalled project.

But when Cuomo got around to the toughest and most consequential public-works problem in New York—Penn Station—he huffed and he puffed and he punted. He had a plan, but over the years it came to seem less like a plan to fix the station and more like a real-estate deal—and perhaps a favor to a political supporter, Steven Roth, the chief of Vornado Realty Trust. Ten "super-talls" would be built in the neighborhood—vast buildings, mostly offices, mostly to be erected by Vornado—with unspecified revenues used to revive the station. Cuomo first announced his plan in 2016, at Madison Square Garden. He did not dwell on the arena's contribution to the station's miserable state.

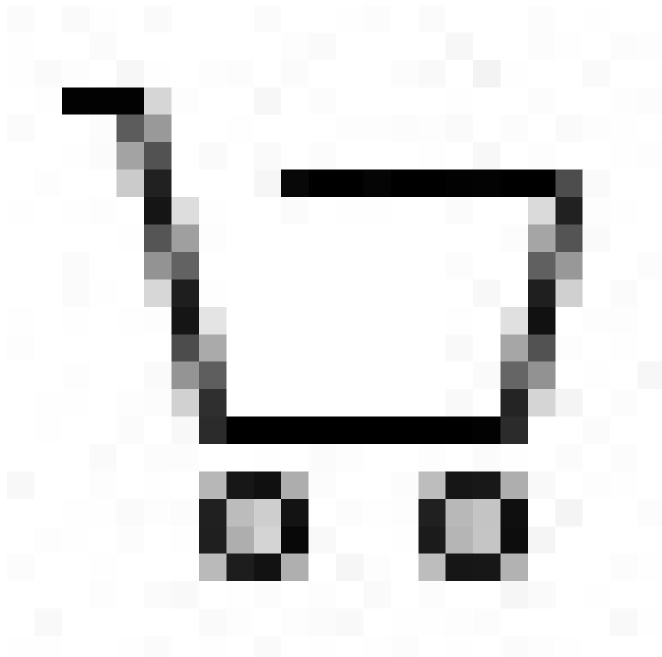


"For this next trick, I'll need a watch, a handkerchief, and a babysitter."
Cartoon by Navied Mahdavian

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The Cuomos and the Dolans have a history. Andrew's father, Mario, once worked as a consulting attorney for Cablevision after he left the governorship. Andrew took large political donations from Dolan. This was not unusual. But then there was Joseph Percoco, Andrew Cuomo's longtime factotum, whom he described as "my father's third son." In 2015, Percoco left his position as the Governor's executive deputy secretary, under the shadow of a federal corruption investigation, and went to work for James Dolan. Percoco remained on M.S.G.'s payroll for months after he was indicted for taking bribes. He was later convicted and sentenced to six years in prison.

In considering the renovation of Penn, Cuomo may have been deterred by the sheer complexity of building a new station. Alexandros Washburn, an architect and city planner who was the first president of the development corporation that built Moynihan Train Hall, told me, "This is the most complicated piece of property in America." He meant the "superblock" that contains the Garden, the subterranean main station, and Two Penn. Amtrak owns the station—basically everything below street level except the subway lines, which are owned by the M.T.A. Dolan owns the air rights above most of the station. Vornado owns Two Penn. The city determines zoning. With so many entrenched interests, Cuomo would be unable to control every variable, as he had, forcefully, on other projects. And a major renovation

could take a decade; unlike with LaGuardia or Moynihan, he wouldn't get credit before leaving office.

There was also the question of where to put the new arena. Chakrabarti proposed a spot on West Thirty-fourth Street, across from Macy's—what I've heard him call "the Hooters site," in honor of one of the entertainment options there. The arena, two blocks deep, would be so close to Penn Station that a disused pedestrian tunnel could connect them. Chakrabarti also proposed, in the redevelopment of those dowdy, underbuilt blocks, two super-talls, at the corners of Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Density is good, especially around busy transit. See Grand Central.

But Cuomo's Penn Station plan didn't even consider relocating the Garden. When critics asked why, he had a state agency called Empire State Development produce a quick paper concluding that moving the arena and building a new station would cost eight and a half billion dollars—almost three times Chakrabarti's estimate. The City Council could serve the Garden with an eviction notice, but it wasn't clear how seriously the owners would take it. What was clear was that Cuomo did not want to inconvenience them in any way.

Madison Square Garden has been New York's biggest stage for mass entertainment for nearly a hundred and fifty years, and, for the Dolans, it has been a lucrative property. As bad as the Knicks generally are, the arena is almost always full for games, with even nosebleed seats sometimes going for two hundred a pop. The Garden stages more than three hundred events a year, and many of its patrons arrive through Penn. Step off your train, find a working escalator (or walk up the stairs), and you're there.

Yes, it's the oldest arena in the N.B.A. Newer arenas, like the Barclays Center, in Brooklyn, have freight elevators that can carry semi trucks straight to the event floor. The Garden's elevators can't accommodate modern trucks—hence all the semis parked across the sidewalks, depressing the neighborhood and complicating the setup for events. And yet the show goes on. Prize fights, rock concerts, political conventions—even the Pope heads there to say Mass when he's in town. Billie Eilish? Madonna, on tour with Bob the Drag Queen? In New York, you'll find them at the Garden.

Among the less distinguished acts to play M.S.G. is Dolan's vanity band, a blues-rock outfit known as J.D. and the Straight Shot. With Dolan out front and a considerable churn of personnel behind him, the band has produced eight albums, which seem to have sold mostly to family and friends. But it opens for big acts like Jewel and the Eagles, and its members travel by private jet—the perks of playing for a singer-songwriter whom Dave McKenna called, in Deadspin, "the richest touring musician in the world." Dolan is apparently a dedicated student of guitar and voice—he shares a vocal coach with Lady Gaga—and he's happy to talk with interviewers about his music, claiming that he is intent on mainstream success. Some of his tunes have made it onto film soundtracks, but those films were all produced by his ex-friend Harvey Weinstein.

Dolan seems to consider the Garden a private fief. In 2017, he had Charles Oakley, a retired Knicks star who had criticized his management, removed from the arena during a game; Oakley resisted, and ended up in handcuffs. Dolan bans adversaries from the Garden and other venues that his company owns, including Radio City Music Hall and the Beacon Theatre. He is presently excluding lawyers at firms that have clients in litigation against any of the Dolan companies—a set of entities spun off and reconfigured from Cablevision, which are often called simply M.S.G. Among the plaintiffs are disgruntled officers of pension funds, alleging self-dealing by Dolan or citing reckless company behavior that may have diminished the value of their investments. The list of banned firms has reportedly grown to ninety.

M.S.G. security uses facial-recognition software to identify those on its blacklist and ejects them without compensation for paid seats. This practice sometimes targets attorneys who know nothing about the cases in question. Kelly Conlon, an attorney, was at a Rockettes Christmas show in Radio City Music Hall with her nine-year-old daughter's Girl Scout troop when she was confronted and removed. Conlon spent two hours on the street, in December rain, waiting to take the girls back to New Jersey. "It was mortifying," she told local TV news.

Incidents like these, along with the ambient creepiness of an entertainment corporation using facial recognition against its patrons, cannot be good for business. In January, elected officials, including Representative Jerry Nadler

and seven state and local politicians, wrote a letter to Dolan, protesting the use of facial recognition and reminding the company of its valuable tax break. Dolan has heard such threats before, and does not seem cowed. Last year, after the City Council threatened not to renew M.S.G.'s operating permit, the company sent back its own warning. If the permit expired, it said, "MSG would be permitted to raze the Garden and *build another structure above Penn Station on an as-of-right basis*." (Italics added to evoke spooky music.) "As-of-right" means, in this context, without discussion. The company apparently got no pushback.

Dolan may be less engaged in the Garden's day-to-day operations than he is in another project, the construction of a vast, ball-shaped performance venue in Las Vegas called the M.S.G. Sphere. But he would have to be much dumber than he is, not to mention a shirker of his duty to his shareholders, to move the Garden unless someone makes him an offer that's too good to refuse. Do we really have to find a prime plot in midtown that's acceptable to James Dolan, buy it, and build him a new Garden before we can get serious about fixing Penn Station? It seems we do.

Last September, Mayor Eric Adams announced that he was open to moving the Garden. "The Penn Station project is a crucial one," he said. "And if that fits into Madison Square Garden moving into another location—maybe we'll help the Knicks win." He flashed a smile—a joke. "So we should be willing to speak with Mr. Dolan and see how it fits into the over-all scheme of that area." After that, the Mayor seemed to lose interest. When the news about Dolan's facial-recognition technology revived questions about whether the Garden would be granted a new permit, Adams brushed them aside, saying that he wasn't interested in "how he runs his mannerisms inside the Garden." Asked about moving M.S.G., he suggested that sitting atop Penn was the right place for it to be. "I think it's a great location," he said. "I'm happy with it being there."

Governor Hochul has largely stuck with the plan she inherited from Cuomo, in which Vornado's revenue would somehow help fix the station. She, too, seems disengaged from the problems at Penn—and, like Adams, perhaps overawed by billionaires like Dolan and Steven Roth, the Vornado chief. (Roth is a longtime Trump associate, but nevertheless maxed out donations to Hochul's campaign last year. The Dolans also plied her with cash.)

Hochul did give a speech last summer in a refurbished L.I.R.R. concourse at Penn, where newly raised ceilings—in an area that's not under the Garden—provide some relief for those who use the "hellhole." Her office distributed renderings for further improvements. The drawings are confusing, but the street view shows a truck jackknifed across a walkway, which is at least a familiar sight. Beyond the truck is a proposed source of daylight for the station below: a modest A-shaped structure running between the arena and Two Penn, which an architect friend describes as an "ass-crack skylight." But building the skylight would require the consent of the Garden, which owns a closed taxiway inside the proposed footprint.

In November, the Vornado plan, with its ten super-talls and untold billions, seemed to go up in smoke. On a conference call with investors, Roth was asked about the schedule. He had no dates. In fact, he said, "the headwinds in the current environment are not at all conducive to ground-up development." This was not so startling to anyone who had been following Vornado's stock price, or, for that matter, interest rates for construction loans, but it seemed to come as a shock to the Hochul administration. Both sides insisted that the Penn Station project was still on, but it was hard to see how that could be true when Vornado was evidently unable to borrow a dime. Hochul, in her recent State of the State address, laid out an agenda of "147 Bold Initiatives." Penn Station was not among them.

Amtrak has hired a prominent engineering and design firm to start conceiving plans for new tracks, platforms, and concourses in the event of a future expansion of the station. But it has never been clear that government is serious about really fixing Penn. The State of New York has created hundreds of public authorities to take responsibility for complex government projects in the past century. Penn Station, with its array of divergent players pursuing their own interests, has no coördinating authority dedicated to its reconstruction. There is federal funding available, under the Biden Administration's infrastructure bill, and Senator Charles Schumer has been working overtime to insure that New York receives its share. As of late last year, though, it wasn't clear that the various agencies that work out of Penn Station were even ready to make credible grant applications. Senator Schumer, for his part, was asked at a public meeting in January whether he thought Madison Square Garden should move. He paused uneasily. "I'll have to get back to you on that," he said.

When “political will” is scarce, can these things get done without government? The Pennsylvania Railroad financed the construction of Penn Station and its tunnels by itself. The same was true for the New York Central Railroad and Grand Central. (Old William H. Vanderbilt, who inherited nearly a hundred million dollars, could have given Jim Dolan a run for his rich-brat money. “Let the public be damned,” he is said to have thundered.) But in those years passenger rail was a dominant business. Today, it is a public good.



When the old Penn Station was demolished, in the nineteen-sixties, it was referred to as an “act of vandalism.”Photograph by McKim, Mead & White / the New York Times / Redux

Sports arenas are another matter. They are usually privately owned, and yet they often enjoy large infusions of public funds. Governor Hochul recently agreed to put six hundred million dollars of state tax money toward a new stadium for the Buffalo Bills. This type of corporate welfare is a function of politics, not economics. It’s crony capitalism—the winners, who generally risk nothing, are already billionaires.

Last year, it seemed for a moment as if the billionaires might help save Penn Station, in the form of the developer Related Companies. Related was founded by Stephen Ross (not to be confused with Steven Roth, of Vornado, although both are super-rich octogenarians in the same business). Its executives approached M.S.G. about moving the arena to a spot across Eleventh Avenue, near Related’s showcase property, a dense nest of glass

skyscrapers known as Hudson Yards. Situated basically in the same place where Michael Bloomberg planned to put his football stadium, Hudson Yards is only half finished. The finished part occupies the eastern half of the rail yards; the western half, the idea went, is where M.S.G. could go, perhaps combined with a casino. M.S.G. walked away from the talks, without publicly acknowledging that they had happened.

Big projects often leave behind them a wake of failed attempts. Before Bloomberg's unrealized stadium, there was, in the same spot, George Steinbrenner's unrealized stadium for the Yankees. In the nineteen-fifties, another tycoon wanted to build the world's tallest skyscraper there, but was rebuffed by the banks. Even Robert Moses had to make several runs at crossing the Verrazzano Narrows (bridge? tunnel? bridge?) before finally getting a bridge built in 1964. "All the channels have to line up—the political, the financial, the design," Washburn, the architect and planner, said. The Moynihan Train Hall, begun under his leadership, took twenty-five years to complete.

The idea that we cannot get public works built except in collaboration with billionaires has become a kind of defeatist gospel among politicians, who are themselves dependent on wealthy donors. Still, Liz Krueger, the chair of the State Senate's finance committee, told me, "It's simpler not to do these deals with real-estate partners. You tend to lose in fights with real estate more than you win." Although Krueger is pessimistic about the City Council's ability to force Dolan to move, she assumes that the cost of effectively buying him out can largely be covered by issuing state bonds. "If the numbers look huge, let's talk about bonding—forty- or fifty-year payments," she said. "Then it's not so scary."

Other public-works projects in New York City, including the reconstruction of lower Manhattan after September 11th, have been funded by bonding. "We have the formula for doing this—bonds issued against the future value of development," Chakrabarti said, one afternoon at his office. "It isn't hard. Moving Madison Square Garden is a clambake compared to what we had to do at the World Trade Center." Chakrabarti spent years working on the reconstruction of the World Trade Center neighborhood as Bloomberg's director of city planning for Manhattan. "This is building a sports arena," he

said. “Other cities do it all the time. We’re New York City.” He said that as if it somehow meant “high-functioning.”

But moving an arena is not ultimately the goal, of course. The goal is a modern train station. “This is the future,” Chakrabarti said. “It’s about high-speed rail lines connecting all these business hubs.” Intercity trains will be well served at Moynihan. What’s needed now, he said, is a facility that will attract regular riders from New Jersey and Long Island: “We need to entice suburban workers back to New York City.”

In the three years since the *Covid*-19 pandemic began, hundreds of thousands of people have left New York—some temporarily, some permanently. It’s believed that Manhattan alone lost two hundred thousand households. Along with nearly forty-five thousand deaths from the virus, the economic blow has been harsh: more than a hundred thousand jobs have still not come back. Tourism, a major employer, is recovering slowly. But the harder financial hit has been the disappearance of commuters.

Nearly four million people used to enter Manhattan’s business districts on weekdays. Now, on average, slightly less than half the office workers in midtown come to the office. Whole ecosystems that served those people—shops, delis, bars, restaurants, food carts, nail salons—have been crushed, wiped out. The office-vacancy rate in midtown is the highest it’s been since the nineteen-seventies, when data first became available. Retail vacancies are also bracingly high. That Hooters on West Thirty-third? Closed permanently. At night, many streets that were lively three years ago now look and feel deserted.

Remote work is here to stay, and you can’t blame commuters for bailing. So many commutes are onerous, wasteful, soul-draining. Weekday subway ridership is a third less than it was in 2019, and the commuter lines have had similar reductions. A recent report issued jointly under the Mayor’s and the Governor’s signatures called the lack of riders “an existential challenge for the financial stability of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.” Janno Lieber, the M.T.A.’s chairman and C.E.O., says that the basic model will need to change; rather than relying on the fare box, he argues, transit should be funded as an essential service, like policing or garbage collection.

NJ Transit's planners have suggested that its ridership may be regained by the early twenty-thirties, but the truth is that nobody knows. Empire State Development, which sometimes seems to exist primarily to produce large numbers for political purposes, announced that by 2038 Penn Station and Moynihan will handle nearly nine hundred thousand passengers a day—an increase of nearly fifty per cent from before the pandemic. Perhaps these numbers were meant to attract federal funds.

It's some comfort that the Mayor and the Governor are co-signing a big what-should-we-do report. Coöperation between the two offices has been weak for many years, especially during Cuomo and Bill de Blasio's two-term pissing contest. The report, calling for a " 'New' New York," argues that, in order to face the challenge of telecommuting, we need to make Midtown "more live-work-play." (Gack.) By that, they basically mean a mass conversion of office space to apartments. These conversions require new city zoning and new state legislation, and they are not cheap, but they have been done before, in the financial district. Only older office buildings need apply, though, since apartments are required by law to have windows that can be opened.

One theory holds that New York is in an "urban doom loop": empty offices create a reduced tax base, which forces cuts in services, which make the city less attractive, and so on down the drain. This prospect is being fearfully debated, not just for New York but for American cities generally. In fact, a November study of workplace recovery found that, among the ten large cities evaluated, New York was the most fully recovered. San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago were in far worse shape. Certainly New York has survived many crises, including the doom loop of the seventies—although the city was so weakened by that experience that Mayor Ed Koch, desperate to keep sports teams from fleeing, gave Madison Square Garden that free pass on city property taxes. Koch later said that he thought the tax break was just for ten years—that's how addled he was.

In late January, President Joe Biden and his Transportation Secretary, Pete Buttigieg, came to New York with good news. A federal grant had been awarded to a long-stalled project known as Gateway, which is intended to remake the rail line between Newark and Penn Station. Biden gave a speech in the rail yards by the Hudson, among rows of shiny train cars, backed by

workers in high-viz orange vests. “This is one of the biggest and most consequential projects in the country,” he said. He was not wrong. Among other things, Gateway will add two new tunnels under the Hudson. The existing tunnels, built back in 1910, were flooded by Hurricane Sandy, and saltwater corrosion has accelerated their deterioration, causing chronic delays. They already operate at maximum capacity, carrying some four hundred and fifty trains a day, and a failure would be catastrophic. The Northeast Corridor, which runs from Washington, D.C., to Boston, would be severed; the economic impact could trigger a national recession.

Senator Schumer, in attendance, was ecstatic. “Finally, finally, finally, we can say Gateway will be built!” His optimism seemed premature. The tunnel project, which is expected to cost at least sixteen billion dollars, with roughly half of that coming from the federal government, has been derailed twice already—in 2010 by Governor Chris Christie, of New Jersey, who reportedly did not want to raise gas taxes to cover his state’s share of the cost, and in 2017 by Trump, who gave no coherent reason. Today, the project’s managers say the tunnels won’t open before 2035. And Biden’s announcement in the rail yard was actually less momentous than it appeared. The grant, for two hundred and ninety-two million dollars, will be used to help build the concrete casing of a tunnel that extends just a few hundred yards west of Tenth Avenue. That was it.

Alon Levy, a research fellow at the Marron Institute of Urban Management at N.Y.U., argues that the Biden Administration should refuse to provide grants to refurbish Penn Station—that money given to New York would likely be wasted. Levy is a passionate supporter of Gateway, but believes that it can be done for a fraction of the proposed cost.

“It’s trivially easy to waste money,” Levy told me. Example: New York’s subway stations are all slated to be made accessible to the disabled, at a projected cost of seventy million dollars per station. Berlin is doing the same thing, for between two million and five million dollars a station. Berlin’s subway stations are simpler, Levy said, and will require fewer elevators, but that does not explain the disparity. Part of it is that planners in New York are padding estimates, to avoid getting blamed for cost overruns. But by doing so, Levy said, “they’re guaranteeing the overruns.”

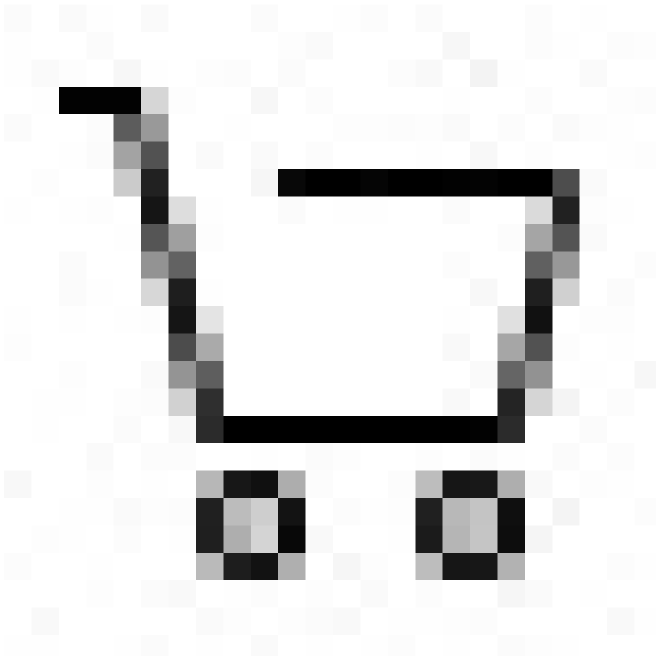


“Can you look up what their house cost, so I know what to wear for this party?”
Cartoon by Emily Flake

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American managers are largely unaware of global best practices, Levy went on: “Insularity is a big problem. It gets worse the higher up you go. Political appointees, politicians themselves, they’re the worst. Then there’s the revolving door. People leave government, go into consulting, get hired by their former colleagues at three times their prior wage. But there’s no urgency, no new ideas. Just groupthink.”

The U.S. passenger rail system never compares well with those in Europe or East Asia. We have no high-speed rail—unless you count ninety-eight miles of Acela track, and even that can’t move trains fast enough to qualify as high-speed in China.

Speed isn’t everything, of course, and there are geographic and historical reasons that passenger rail is so feeble in the U.S. But New York City is deeply dependent on trains. It has one of the world’s largest subway systems, and a big commuter-rail network, and most of it is an antique, underfunded mess. Other metro systems, from Seoul to Shanghai, put New York’s to shame. Some of these have the advantage of being newer. Yet the Paris Métro and the London Underground are at least as old, and both are cleaner, more efficient, far more reliable—and certainly have no major stations as grim and neglected as Penn.

These cities are able, moreover, to complete enormous new transit projects. London recently opened the Elizabeth line, which required thirteen miles of tunnelling through the heart of the city. Paris has embarked on an even larger expansion, which aims to add sixty-eight new stations to the Métro and two hundred kilometres of rail line, doubling the system's reach and ridership.

New York, meanwhile, just opened a new L.I.R.R. line from Queens to Grand Central, known as East Side Access. It was originally slated to take seven years and cost six billion dollars. It took sixteen years and cost more than eleven billion. William Stead, who served as its chief executive for eighteen months, told the *Daily News*, "It's the most poorly managed project in the history of public works." The M.T.A., he said, kept three sets of books, in order to mislead the public and the federal government. Contractors and consultants billed without restraint. (The M.T.A. says that the situation has improved under new leadership.) Per mile, the L.I.R.R. line was the most expensive rail-tunnel route ever built. The initial phase of the Second Avenue line was the most expensive subway track. Construction costs on the Paris subway have been, per mile, about a seventh of those in New York.

Levy, who moved to Berlin four years ago, does not share the grief of most sentient New Yorkers over the destruction of the old Penn Station. Levy once trolled transit geeks by proposing, on a popular blog, that the station could be just a hole in the ground, with walkways over the platforms. The thing that matters most is not what obsessives call "the aesthetics" but performance—that the trains run on time and at an acceptable cost. In Germany and Japan, track assignments are published months in advance. At Penn, you never know what track a train will leave from till the last minute. When the announcement comes, there's the inevitable stampede for that too-narrow escalator.

Earlier this year, M.S.G. began the lengthy process of applying for a new operating permit. Among the first steps was a public hearing with the local community board, which has reliably depicted the Garden as a lousy neighbor, mostly because of the way it obstructs Penn Station. The hearing was held in late February, and M.S.G. sent representatives to argue for a new permit "in perpetuity." But one of them, an executive vice-president named Joel Fisher, allowed for a surprising possibility: that such a permit would not

preclude the Garden's eventually moving to, say, the spot across Seventh Avenue that some of us still call the Hooters site. That "probably would satisfy us," he said.

Layla Law-Gisiko, the chair of the community board's land-use committee, has spent years battling M.S.G. She was astonished. After the meeting, she told *Crain's*, "This was certainly, for us, the first time that we've heard M.S.G. express that they would consider this option." The *Post* called it a "stunning concession." Rather than summarily firing Fisher for his departure from the company line, M.S.G. issued a comment that sounded more like an opening bid than like a denial. "If there was a realistic plan presented to us, that was centrally located, in close proximity to mass transit, and that addressed the $8.5 billion in public funding that Empire State Development has estimated it would cost to move the Garden, we would of course listen," a spokesperson said.

The invocation of the dollar figure originally generated to halt discussion of a move had a sort of poetic justice. Anyway, it was a place to start. Would Governor Hochul seize the opportunity to start negotiations? The plan she inherited for Penn Station has foundered.

In the meantime, private citizens and community activists work toward humane solutions. At the Cooper Union event, Washburn and Chakrabarti presented strikingly different plans. Washburn, who heads a group called the Grand Penn Community Alliance, is sixty and has worked all over the world, yet still describes himself as a student of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In Moynihan's view, "problems poorly stated" were the bane of public policy, and the problem of Penn Station had been very poorly stated. The goal was not, as in the Vornado plan, "taller office buildings with less taxes paid." The goal was a great train station, carefully defined. "It is not about architecture," Washburn said. "Green is the new civic." He led a sweeping, computer-generated video tour of his vision: knock down the Garden and Two Penn and turn much of the block into a park, with five full concourses underneath. At the east end of the superblock was a neoclassical station, built of granite and glass. The tour ended on an elegantly set table in an elegant station restaurant—a perfect place to propose, Washburn suggested. The crowd loved it. He left them with a rallying cry: "No surrender!"

Chakrabarti wore a gray suit with an open collar. “Penn Station is about, to me, more than the station,” he said. The central question, to his mind, was “Do we still have a public city?” What had been lost, along with Penn Station, was a belief that American cities should serve the people who live and work in them. Rebuilding urban infrastructure to a high standard meant renewing that belief.

He showed slides of his famous repurposed Garden superstructure, with the light-flooded station. But his narration was hard-nosed. As for Two Penn, he said, he would leave it there. The building was “not architecturally quite distinctive,” he admitted, but it would cost too much to get Vornado to tear it down. The crowd seemed restive at this concession. Chakrabarti pointed out some problems with the design of the original Penn Station, observing, “There can be great architecture that is not great urbanism.” These points were also poorly received.

Chakrabarti laid out his proposal to move the Garden to West Thirty-fourth Street, across from Macy’s. In that room at the Cooper Union, it was a bit like presenting the enemy’s shiny new redoubt, which we will have to build for him. Chakrabarti really lost the crowd, though, when he showed a proposal for the blocks on which the new Garden would sit. On the corners, at the avenues, were the mixed-use super-talls that would help pay for the whole mega-project. One of them looked taller than the Empire State Building. People actually booed. Chakrabarti smiled and looked out at the audience, shading his eyes. “I want to know the people who move to New York City and hate skyscrapers,” he said. ♦

By Lawrence Wright

By Ted Geltner

By Ava Kofman

By Marion Renault

Poems

- **“Guilt Mountain”**
- **“Incipit”**

By **Ishmael Reed**

Read by the author.

When he does his taxes,
He finds charges for things
He didn't sign up for.
No chance to read about penalties and
Interest rates.
He didn't sign up for life's contract.

Would he initial
"I agree" after reading life's
Terms?
Promising him a chance to

Stroll, sprint, and trot on a star. Flowers, honey, an unlimited chance to walk in a meadow of peace like the one at Yosemite, a crack-house pile of money each day and
Straight A's.

The penalties are spelled out in a font so tiny as
To be unreadable.
Would the fines be: "Hurt Heartache Tragedy Grief"?

He's had his share yet lives like a prince
Or at least as a court member.
He remembers
The beauty now dust
Who could not
Bring children to full term.
He and she were educated.
Read books and turned
Them over to Science,
Where they floated in jars.

She became The Cat Lady
And gave each cat those
Stillborn children’s names.

Were his genes to blame?
Do miscarriages run in families?
Is that what his mother meant when
She said, “A lot of your brothers and sisters didn't make it”?
He woke one night to find her lying on the living-room floor.
He thought that she was dead.
When his stepfather called 911, he could not say “miscarriage.”
He said “misfortune.”

One day, he felt excruciating
Pressure on his back; the Doctor said,
“The Baron has been riding you. You hurt
Every time he grins. He’s always thirsty,
Which explains your dehydration.
He likes the Bayou and hates deserts.”

For a while, he found desert life agreeable.
The burden on his back ceased.
He dreamed of a nude woman with a Benin face.
An orange-headed condor with black wings
Was lifting
Her to one of those California skies, the color
Of robins’ eggs.
This scene occurred above Big Sur.

Desert life was cheap.
He raised prize cacti and explored cliff dwellings, but he ached for the city. On his heart is a street directory. That’s where their survivor found him, her voices in tow. She taught him why some people subject to foul whispers get

mad when you praise their gifts.
The chatter that berates them spends more time with them than you.

Out here, smiling climbers
Take selfies when they
Reach the summits of mountains.

But Guilt Mountain?
It has no top.

By Lauren Michele Jackson

By Saidiya Hartman

By Jessica Winter

By Dennard Dayle

By Billy Collins

Read by the author.

Too bad this poem wasn’t written
in a 12th-century monastic scriptorium
because it would have begun
with a much bigger T,
which would loom over the smaller letters,
their tiny serifs fluttering in the breeze.

The big letter might even be inside
an illuminated scene,
perhaps showing in gold two monkeys,
or six younger ones, hanging
from the crossbar of the T
with vines and flowers growing all around.

More likely, you’d be treated to
the reminder of a skull,
a sheep and shepherd combo,
or the Cross itself, empty now,
with a long winding shroud
draped over its outstretched arms.

But I’d hate to spend my days
hidden under a brown cowl,
writing with a bony, arthritic hand
at a long table of other hooded figures,
then washing down a crust of bread
with medieval water from a dented goblet.

I’d miss my silver car and my stereo
and my wife, who cooks us Cajun shrimp,
so never mind—the plain letter T will do.
Plus, I love being stuck here
in the science fiction of my 21st-century life
even with all the dying around me,

the planet now barely able to spin,
and my pen slithering off into oblivion.

By Souvankham Thammavongsa

By Sue D. Gelber

By Kyle Chayka

By Eileen Myles

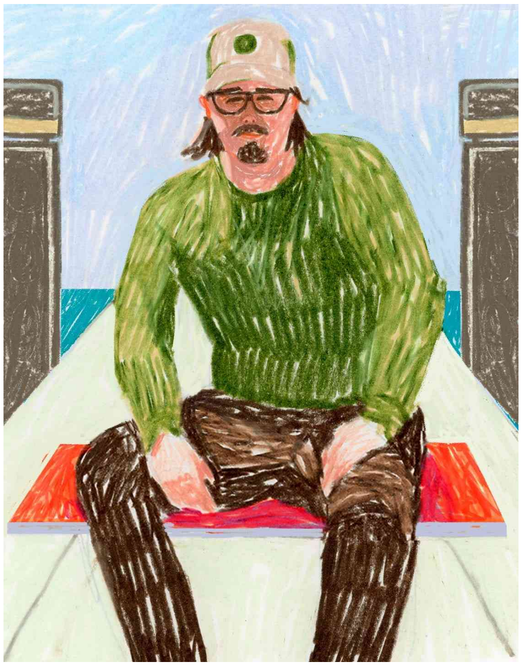
Pop Music

- **Can HARDY Revive “Butt Rock”?**

Can HARDY Revive “Butt Rock”?

Onstage, the musician plays the role of a small-town boy who is too rock for country, and too country for rock and roll.

By Kelefa Sanneh



It is no longer unusual to encounter a song by a mainstream country star that requires an “explicit lyrics” tag. But it is unusual to encounter one that requires a spoiler alert. The song, if you would like to encounter it unspoiled, is called “the mockingbird & *THE CROW*,” and it appears at the midpoint of an album with the same title, which was recently released by a singer and songwriter from Philadelphia, Mississippi, named Michael Hardy, who has dropped his first name and capitalized all the letters in his last one. The song starts, as so many country songs do, by conjuring small-town life, and it culminates, at first, in a wry chorus that’s surprisingly forthright about the nature of country stardom: “I’m a mockingbird / Singin’ songs that sound like other songs you’ve heard.”

HARDY made his mark as a high-concept craftsman, finding new ways to give country listeners what they wanted. His breakthrough single, “*ONE BEER*,” from 2019, began with a startling evocation of kids worrying about an unexpected pregnancy (“Seventeen in a small town, weak knees in a

CVS”), but it turned out to be both a drinking song and an ode to settling down: “Ain’t it funny what one beer can turn into?” And he helped write Blake Shelton’s No. 1 country hit “God’s Country,” which converted the treacly term into a truculent declaration of regional pride. “The Devil went down to Georgia, but he didn’t stick around—this is God’s country,” Shelton snarled.

Nearly halfway through the “mockingbird” song, *HARDY* rebels against the demands of Nashville craftsmanship. The mood shifts, and so does the key, from friendly C-major to mistrustful C-minor:

> Do this, do that: that shirt, this hat
> Don’t forget to smile, kiss the ring once in a while
> Don’t say those words, put down your finger
> Throw in a slow love song or two—well, fuck that! And fuck you!

By the time he shouts those last words, *HARDY* no longer sounds recognizably “country.” Much of the rest of the album is given over to minor chords, rhythmic riffs, and occasional bouts of screaming. It turns out that “the mockingbird & *THE CROW*” is a concept album, built around a generic divide: the first eight songs, with lowercase titles, lean country; the latter eight, with capitalized titles, lean grunge, or hard rock; the title track, in the middle, functions as a musical ampersand. *HARDY* was sitting in his tour bus in Grand Rapids, Michigan, when I spoke to him a few weeks ago, and he explained that the album was halfway finished before he saw that it had a split personality. “Once I realized what I was accidentally doing, then I homed in on being more conscious of writing a rock song one day, a country song the next,” he said.

There is nothing novel about country singers borrowing from rock and roll: in the nineties, Garth Brooks became one of the genre’s biggest stars by putting on concerts that resembled arena-rock spectacles, and, in the two-thousands, country airwaves were full of nods to old-fashioned rock. (Bon Jovi had a No. 1 country hit with “Who Says You Can’t Go Home,” in 2006.) Nowadays, in country music, references to rock and roll are so commonplace that they no longer register as cross-genre gestures. When a singer named Jackson Dean declares, “Got a screen door for a TV / The only

A.C. I got is AC/DC," he is referencing the venerable Australian hard-rock band to evoke the pleasures of rural American life.

HARDY, who is thirty-two, acknowledges that country music is sometimes thought of as being a decade or more behind the cutting edge, which might be another way of saying that country singers tend to be influenced by the non-country music they grew up with. Some of *HARDY*'s first favorite CDs were by turn-of-the-century rock and nu-metal bands like Puddle of Mudd, System of a Down, and Linkin Park; as a teen-ager, he gravitated toward punk and metalcore bands like August Burns Red and A Day to Remember, whose lead singer appears on "*RADIO SONG*," a good-natured country sing-along that turns out to be, as the majuscular title might suggest, roaringly unsuitable for country radio. Then again, part of the genius of country music is the unpredictable way it absorbs outside influences. Listeners long ago learned to love electric guitars and even hip-hop phrasing, so maybe *HARDY*'s success is proof that they are now learning to love screamed choruses and heavy mosh parts, too.

HARDY arrived in New York the other night for a sold-out show at the Hammerstein Ballroom; virtually everyone in the crowd seemed to be wearing plaid flannel, which suited both the weather and the sound. "My name is *HARDY*, and we're going to rock your fuckin' face off tonight," he said. On the title track of the new album, *HARDY* seems to be contrasting the unbridled authenticity of rock and roll with the calculated clichés of country music, but he's canny enough to realize that each tradition contains plenty of both. (What phrase, or sentiment, could be more hackneyed than "Fuck you!"?) He played "*BOOTS*," an older song about waking up with your boots on, hungover and newly single, right before "*TRUCK BED*," a new song about waking up in the back of a pickup, hungover and newly single.

With his dark mullet, glasses, and plain stage wardrobe (typically a black T-shirt), *HARDY* doesn't look much like a rock star or a country star. But he understands how the two forms of credibility can be mutually reinforcing: all night long, he played the role of the rowdy small-town boy, too country for the rock world and too rock and roll for the country world. "I'm still the same old redneck fuck, don't give a damn / Ain't afraid to throw a dead buck on my Instagram," he sang. That song, "*SOLD OUT*," was the theme song

for the recent W.W.E. Royal Rumble, during which he performed. Afterward, Dustin Rhodes, the son of the legendary wrestler Dusty Rhodes, tweeted a message that *HARDY* might not have disagreed with. “That shit ain’t country,” Rhodes wrote. “Sorry, not sorry.”

Perhaps there was a time—in the eighties, say, when Alabama was singing “Dixieland Delight,” or the early two-thousands, when Toby Keith was declaring himself an “Angry American”—when country was the most uncool music in America, at least according to listeners in big coastal cities who care a lot about being cool. Nowadays, that superlative must surely belong to the kind of music at home on radio formats known as “active rock” and “mainstream rock,” and which detractors sometimes call “butt rock,” a coinage that seems to have been inspired by radio stations that promised to play “nothing but rock.” Neither New York nor Los Angeles has a major radio station that specializes in “active rock,” but the style endures at stations like KDJE, outside Little Rock (“Arkansas’s rock station”), or KQXR, in southwest Idaho (“The X rocks”).

Compared with country radio, this is a relatively small market—Greg Thompson, the president of Big Loud Management, which guides *HARDY*’s career, estimates that a No. 1 song on mainstream-rock radio reaches an audience about a quarter as big as the audience for a No. 1 country song. (Polls suggest that Americans still love rock more than any other genre, but the audience has splintered; there are “alternative” stations, which might also play doleful singer-songwriters like Billie Eilish, and classic-rock stations, which are devoted to the proposition that they don’t make ’em like they used to.) Sometimes it seems as if rock-radio playlists have scarcely changed since the early two-thousands. Listeners can still hear new songs by Metallica and Foo Fighters, alongside the latest from bands like Papa Roach and Disturbed, who were MTV favorites back then, and these days make little impression on mainstream popular culture.

In this context, a performer like *HARDY* is not a throwback but an infusion of energy; he is one of a handful of performers who have lately enlivened rock radio. When he came to Hammerstein, he was promoting “*JACK*,” a single that has just reached No. 6 on the mainstream-rock airplay chart; it was his first rock-radio hit. (It’s sung from the perspective of Jack Daniel’s, with a typically playful twist: the titular word is withheld until the very end.)

This past year, a tattooed former rapper named Jelly Roll managed an even more impressive feat: he sent one song, a brooding complaint called “Dead Man Walking,” to the top of the mainstream-rock chart, while sending another, a ballad called “Son of a Sinner,” to the top of the country airplay chart. And a few months ago Warner Music Nashville, home to country mainstays like Shelton, announced that it had signed one of the most entertaining bands on rock radio: Giovannie and the Hired Guns, a group of self-proclaimed “Tejano punk boyz” who revive the sound of nineties rock-radio favorites like Weezer, Sublime, and blink-182. The group’s breakthrough single is named for Ramón Ayala, the legendary Norteño singer, and one of its most recent songs, “Overrated,” uses a tuba to accentuate the bass line.

The most interesting thing about *HARDY*’s newfound success in the world of rock and roll is how little he seems to need it. He is still a force in the bigger and more lucrative world of country: his most recent country single, a bluesy murder ballad called “wait in the truck,” recently ascended to No. 9 on the country airplay chart. He continues to work closely with his friend Morgan Wallen, the country star who is one of the most popular singers in America, of any genre. (Wallen and *HARDY* share a producer, Joey Moi, who also produced many of the Nickelback songs that helped define butt rock, in the early two-thousands.) Wallen’s new double album, “One Thing at a Time,” is essentially guaranteed to be a blockbuster; it includes three songs that *HARDY* helped write, along with a duet, “In the Bible,” a wry but heartfelt song about the two men’s quasi-religious devotion to being “country.” This summer, *HARDY* is going on the road with Wallen, who plays football and baseball stadiums. In “the mockingbird & *THE CROW*,” *HARDY* imagines seeing “twenty-five thousand rednecks with my dumb face on their T-shirt,” and he’s not there yet—but he’s getting closer. ♦

By Rachel Aviv

By James Lasdun

By Caitlin Reid

By Ricardo Nuila

Profiles

- Agnes Callard’s Marriage of the Minds

Agnes Callard's Marriage of the Minds

The philosopher, who lives with her husband and her ex-husband, searches for what one human can be to another human.

By Rachel Aviv



Arnold Brooks, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, came to Agnes Callard's office hours every week to talk about Aristotle. At the last session of the quarter, in the spring of 2011, they discussed Aristotle's treatise Metaphysics, and what it means to be one—as opposed to more than one. "It was the sort of question where I felt it would be reasonable to feel ecstatic if you made some kind of progress," Arnold told me. Agnes was the only person he'd ever met who seemed to feel the same way.

Agnes specializes in ancient philosophy and ethics, but she is also a public philosopher, writing popular essays about experiences—such as jealousy, parenting, and anger—that feel to her like "dissociated matter," falling outside the realm of existing theories. She is often baffled by the human conventions that the rest of us have accepted. It seems to her that we are all intuitively copying one another, adopting the same set of arbitrary behaviors and values, as if by osmosis. "How has it come to pass," she writes, "that we take ourselves to have any inkling at all about how to live?"

She was married to another philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, Ben Callard, and they had two young sons. To celebrate the end of the term, Agnes had made cookies for her students, and she gave an extra one to Arnold, a twenty-seven-year-old with wavy hair that fell to his shoulders, who was in his first year of the graduate program in philosophy. As Arnold ate the cookie, Agnes, who was thirty-five, noticed that he had "just this incredibly weird expression on his face. I couldn't understand that expression. I'd never seen it before." She asked why he was making that face.

"I think I'm a little bit in love with you," he responded.

Agnes had felt that there was something slightly odd about her weekly sessions with Arnold, but she hadn't been sure what it was. Now the nature of the oddness became apparent. "I think I'm in love with you, too," she told him. They both agreed that nothing could happen. They leaned out her window and smoked a cigarette. Then Arnold left her office.

The next day, Agnes and her sons flew to New York to visit her parents. Ben had gone to Philadelphia to see his mother, who was recovering from surgery. On the plane, Agnes said, "it felt like I was having a revelation in the clouds." For the first time in her life, she felt as if she had access to a certain "inner experience of love," a state that made her feel as if there were suddenly a moral grail, a better kind of person to be. She realized that within her marriage she didn't have this experience. If she stayed married, she would be pretending.

When she landed, she told her parents that she had to get divorced. "We didn't think it made any sense," her mother, Judit Gellen, said. "We had seen Agnes and Ben a couple weeks earlier, for a long weekend, and it seemed like everything was great." Agnes's sister Kata Gellen, a professor of German studies at Duke, said, "I love Ben—who is really generous in every sense of the word, an impossible person to dislike—and I just felt like No, this can't be right." Of her marriage, Agnes said, "There were no problems. We never fought. We just got along really well. We talked a lot about philosophy."

The next morning, she took a train to Philadelphia to tell Ben, who specializes in the philosophy of mind, language, and mathematics, how she felt. “We talked for an entire day,” she said. “I was approaching him with, like, ‘Here’s what happened. What should we do?’ ” The conversation felt so honest that she realized she had probably never felt so close to Ben in her life. He encouraged her to take time before making a decision; she agreed to try therapy. But the next morning Ben called and said that she was right: they should get a divorce. “I think we both trusted each other enough in that crisis moment to listen to the other person and take seriously what they were saying,” Ben told me. “So, to that extent, it was connected to millions of other conversations we’ve had. She was just showing me the same things she had seen. Once I saw them, it sort of clicked, and everything became very clear.” He described Agnes as “the least complacent person I’ve ever met.”

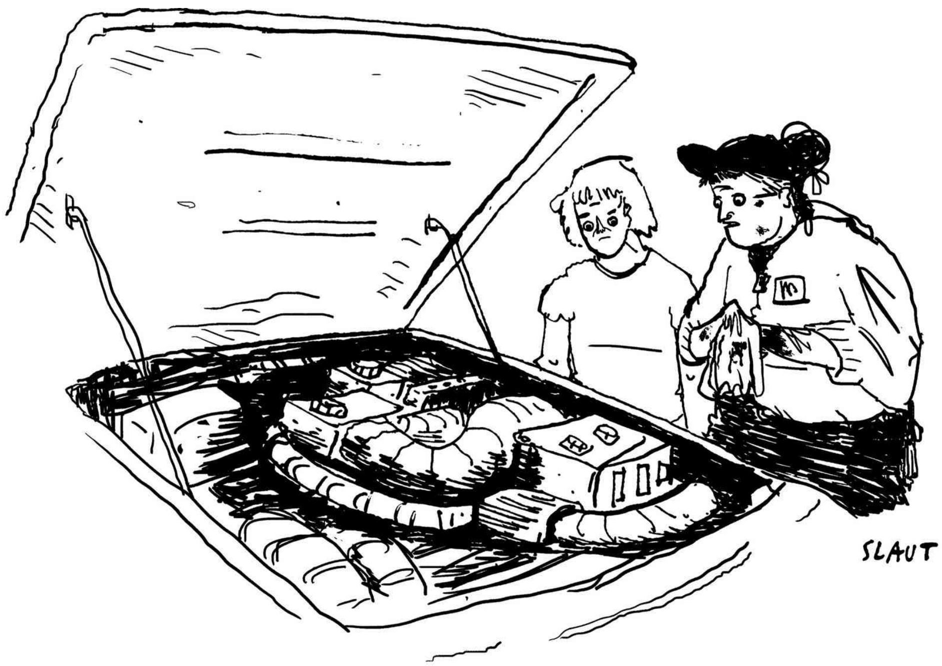
Agnes was extremely upset that the divorce would harm their children, but she felt that the alternative was that she would become a bad person. “I thought that I would become sort of corrupted by staying in a marriage where I no longer felt like I was aspirational about it,” she said. Her friends and relatives suggested that she just have an affair, but that felt impossible. “It’s like you have this vision of this wonderful, grand possibility, and then you decide to just play at it, treating it like a vacation or something. It seemed like a desecration of that vision.”

Agnes and Ben shared a divorce lawyer, and their divorce was finalized within three weeks of her introducing the idea. Ben said, “I think to an unusual degree Agnes sort of lives what she thinks and thinks what she lives.”

Agnes and Arnold struggled to do their work. Almost every day they went out for coffee together and had long conversations about philosophy—which felt like the real work. (In accordance with university guidelines, they had declared their desire to have a relationship to the chair of the philosophy department, and Agnes recused herself from academic authority over Arnold.) Sometimes it seemed to Agnes that the universe had been prearranged for her benefit. If she and Arnold were taking a walk together and she craved a croissant, a bakery would suddenly appear. If she needed a book, she would realize that she was passing a bookstore, and the text she

wanted was displayed in the window. She thought that this was now her permanent reality.

Arnold said that, the first time Agnes's sons came to his apartment, "I remember watching them play on the furniture and suddenly realizing: this is the point of furniture. And with Agnes it was the same sort of thing: the world of a relationship has all sorts of furniture in it—the things you do and say and all of the conventions. But with Agnes, for the first time, I felt like it had some kind of point."



"To make it roadworthy again, you're looking at fifteen hundred. To just get it back to where you can ignore it and live in a state of constant, low-frequency fear, four-fifty."
Cartoon by Sara Lautman

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News of the divorce reached her students, and Agnes worried that they would feel disoriented or betrayed. That term, she had been invited to be the keynote speaker at an undergraduate conference for philosophy students. She decided to give her talk about what had happened to her. It was titled

“On the Kind of Love Into Which One Falls.” Ben read drafts of the talk in advance and gave her feedback. He and Arnold sat next to each other in the front row.

“Six and a half weeks ago, I fell in love for the first time,” she began. “You did not think I was a person who would subject her children to divorce. You did not think I was a person who would be married to someone she had not fallen in love with. You are not sure whether you know me anymore.” She told her students that she felt she had a professional obligation to clarify the situation. Philosophers often describe love from the outside, but she could provide an inside account. Her experience had prompted her to reinterpret a famous speech, in the Symposium, in which Socrates, whom she considers her role model, argues that the highest kind of love is not for people but for ideals. She was troubled by Socrates’ unerotic and detached view of love, and she proposed that he was actually describing how two lovers aspire to embody ideals together. True lovers, she explained, don’t really want to be loved for who they are; they want to be loved because neither of them is happy with who he or she is. “One of the things I said very early on to my beloved was this: ‘I could completely change now,’ ” she recounted. “Radical change, becoming a wholly other person, is not out of the question. There is suddenly room for massive aspiration.”

After the talk, a colleague told Agnes that she was speaking as if she thought she were Socrates. “I was, like, ‘Yeah, that’s what it felt like,’ ” she said. “I felt like I had all this knowledge. And it was wonderful. It was an opportunity to say something truthful about love.”

In “Parallel Lives,” a study of five couples in the Victorian era, the literary critic Phyllis Rose observes that we tend to disparage talk about marriage as gossip. “But gossip may be the beginning of moral inquiry, the low end of the platonic ladder which leads to self-understanding,” she writes. “We are desperate for information about how other people live because we want to know how to live ourselves, yet we are taught to see this desire as an illegitimate form of prying.” Rose describes marriage as a political experience and argues that talking about it should be taken as seriously as conversations about national elections: “Cultural pressure to avoid such talk as ‘gossip’ ought to be resisted, in a spirit of good citizenship.”

Agnes views romantic relationships as the place where some of the most pressing philosophical problems surface in life, and she tries to "navigate the moral-opprobrium reflexes in the right way," she said, so that people won't dismiss the topic as unworthy of public discussion. "If you're a real philosopher," she once tweeted, "you don't need privacy, because you're a living embodiment of your theory at every moment, even in your sleep, even in your dreams."

Jonathan Lear, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, said that Agnes approaches every conversation as if it were integral to her life's work, as it was for Socrates. "She's attempting to live a philosophical life, and this includes taking responsibility for the very concept of marriage," he said. "Part of what I take to be her bravery is that she is looking around, asking, 'Hey, I know all these couples have gotten rings and gone to the courthouse, but are they married?' One thing you can do with that question is forget all about it and find some deadline to be anxious about. Or you can really hear the question, vividly. That's the place where philosophy begins—with a certain anxiety about how to live the life that is yours."

Agnes's work, which won the 2020 Lebowitz Prize for philosophical achievement, searches for ways in which we can become better selves than we are. She writes philosophy columns for *The Point* and the *Times*, and she will agree to a podcast with essentially anyone who asks, regardless of that person's politics or credentials. She also has her own podcast, called "Minds Almost Meeting," with Robin Hanson, a libertarian-leaning economist with whom she constantly disagrees. "I think you are insulting the human race in your book," she told him in one episode. In 2018, when she accidentally got pregnant, she gave a speech about misogyny at a conference of the Eastern American Philosophical Association, then told a room full of philosophers that she was considering having an abortion. "I am pregnant, and I don't know whether I want to be," she said. "Your shock is, of course, why most of those women don't talk about it; still less does anyone confess to being, at that very moment, engaged in the deliberative activity of weighing the value of a future human life." (At a Q. & A. session with two other panelists after her talk, no comments were directed toward her. Not long afterward, she had a miscarriage.)

Arnold saw Agnes's first book, "Aspiration," which she began writing the year after they met, in part as an attempt to make sense of their experience of falling in love. In the book, which was published in 2018, she describes how philosophers have often scoffed at the idea of self-creation. Nietzsche dismissed the idea that a person could "pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness." But the book argues that people can embark on a path toward a destination, a new way of being a person, that they can't yet see or understand—a process that she calls aspiration. When aspirants make decisions, they are guided by the possibility of a future self that does not yet exist. They imitate mentors or competitors, risking pretension, because they understand that their current values are deficient; they haven't made room for another way of seeing themselves or the world.

Arnold came to see the idealism of the early weeks of their relationship as the first stage of aspiration. "What we had was an imperfect vision of something, but it pretended to be clear," he told me. Within a few months, they saw that in many ways they were incompatible. "Most people, myself included, would have met the realization with the thought: How could I have stepped into this with such naïveté, with such childish blindness?" he said. "But her instinct was to trust that initial experience."

Agnes and Arnold married a year after her divorce, at a chapel on campus. Ben gave the toast at the rehearsal dinner. By then, Agnes recognized that she'd oversold her understanding of love to her students. At the time, she thought she'd achieved more than she had. Nevertheless, she said, she'd had enough of a glimpse—a "foretaste of future knowledge"—to reorganize her life in such a way that a future self would "look back and be, like, Yes, she was on her way."

A few months into their relationship, Agnes and Arnold had a bad fight, and she came across a copy of *Cook's Illustrated* that Ben had given her for Hanukkah years before, inscribed with a loving note. She remembered that she had been happy at the time. "I was just, like, Wait a minute, maybe I'm just doing the same thing again. The veil was lifted with Ben, and now it is being lifted again." But she was consoled by the idea that she and Arnold were philosophical about their relationship in a way that she and Ben had not been. Agnes, who was diagnosed with autism in her thirties, felt that she and Arnold were trying to navigate the problem of loneliness—not the kind

that occurred when each of them was in a room alone but the sort of loneliness that they felt in the presence of another person. Most couples struggle with a version of this problem, but it often feels like a private burden. For Agnes, it was philosophical work, a way of sorting out "what one human can be to another human." It seemed to her that Arnold had come to her with a question: Is it possible to eliminate the loneliness that is intrinsic to any relationship, to be together in a way that makes full use of another person's mind?

Agnes has generally avoided speaking publicly about being autistic, in part because she worries that people will find it preposterous for her to use a label once closely associated with people who are nonverbal. But she feels that the diagnosis helps her understand her immunity to the pull of a certain received structure of meaning. In addition to the philosophical underpinning of her marriage to Arnold, there is perhaps an autistic one, too, in that most of us learn to ignore all the subtle ways in which we settle and compromise, based on our received sense that this is the way relationships work. Agnes never assumed that those social conventions inherently made sense. The period during which she and Arnold fell in love felt like proof. It was, she said, "the first moment when the world says to you, 'That can be possible.' Nothing can be more important than that. Every other little wrinkle and confusion—it's, like, whatever. Forget it. Set this aside. This thing is possible. And that's amazing—you're right to be taken in. Even when you start to see, Oh, he doesn't quite live up to the ideal, you owe them the very existence of the ideal in you. You owe them your projection. They pointed you in that direction."

Marriage takes many shapes, but a common one is a downward-sloping line. It begins at the top—the intensity of falling in love, feeling seen and heard in all your fullness—and the rest of the relationship is an attempt to hold on to the ideal without the attenuation's becoming too terrible. Joan Didion called this phase of marriage "the traditional truce, the point at which so many resign themselves to cutting both their losses and their hopes." But Agnes saw her relationship with Arnold as a kind of ladder. They were on the bottom step, attempting to climb the ladder together, in pursuit of a shared ideal: the right kind of mental dependence. Her thoughts felt like "mushy dots," but, through conversations with Arnold, they had started to solidify.

“It was only then that I felt I could settle on things and start to complete a thought,” she said.

Agnes and Ben shared custody of the children, who moved between their old apartment and a new one that Agnes shared with Arnold. On Agnes’s nights with the children, Ben would often come over and have dinner, and they’d talk about philosophical questions together. Ben approached Arnold with openness and warmth. Arnold told me, “He could have gotten really upset and done a bunch of destructive things—perhaps I would have, and I’m quite sure plenty of other philosophers would have—but it would have been useless destruction, and Ben had the foresight to see that you shouldn’t do what you will later regret.”

Agnes got pregnant shortly after getting married, and she and Arnold moved back into the apartment that she had shared with Ben. It seemed unnecessarily burdensome for the oldest children to bounce between two homes, spending half their time away from their youngest sibling, a brother. “We wanted all three children to have breakfast together,” Ben said. Agnes noticed that people who had once urged her not to get a divorce were now pushing her to distance herself from Ben, to make a “clean break.” But she and Ben were still dependent on each other in ways that she didn’t want to ignore. They saw no reason to separate their bank accounts. They never stopped talking about philosophy. Ben took on a parental role with the youngest boy, Izzy, assuming a roughly equal share of the child care. When Agnes’s best friend, Yelena Baraz, a professor of Classics at Princeton, visited, she was struck by how happy the children seemed. All of them had “genuinely gained a parent,” she told me.

Jonathan Lear, Agnes’s colleague, said that, when he first learned about the reasons for her divorce, he was reminded of a passage in Bertrand Russell’s autobiography. Russell describes how he went bicycling one afternoon and, as he was riding along a country road, realized that he no longer loved his wife. “Something similar happened to Agnes,” Lear said, but instead of bicycling back and severing ties, as Russell eventually did, “they spent their life happily together—all three of them. To my eyes, it’s a beautiful, mutually supportive creation.”

When I told a friend about Agnes's home life, she said that she was reminded of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, about a utopian city where everyone's happiness depends on the suffering of one child, who is locked in a dark cellar, abandoned and starving. My friend suggested that Ben must live in the metaphorical cellar, sacrificing himself for the good of the family—an interpretation that, on some level, made sense to me. I had noticed, among my friends, that some of the most successful marriages involved inequality, and clarity about it: one person sacrificed more than the other, and it was O.K. Agnes told me that this interpretation was wrong. "That is a really common interpretation of our situation, and I'm struck by *how* common it is," she added.

In an e-mail, Ben explained that he understood that people assumed that he hadn't chosen the situation but was merely enduring it, but this was false. "Agnes and I are close friends, and we have a lot of respect for each other," he wrote. "But at this point neither of us can even imagine being married to the other person. I have moved on, just as she has." He continued, "We may well stop living together once the kids leave home, but until then we are all having a blast raising three (now two) sons together." (Their oldest son had just left for college.) He said that the two oldest boys were like sons to Arnold, and Izzy was like a son to him. "I count myself very lucky to know Arnold," he went on. "A few years ago he and I camped in the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, and in the middle of a freezing night we went to a clearing in the forest and watched the International Space Station shoot across the star-filled sky. Next year, we are co-teaching a course on paradoxes."

Agnes hosts a popular late-night conversation series at the University of Chicago called "Night Owls," in which she and another scholar spend up to three hours debating a single subject, like sacredness or death or organized violence. About eight years after her divorce, she and Ben held a session called "The Philosophy of Divorce," which was attended by hundreds of students. Agnes, who always wears bright colors, wore a dress with psychedelic swirls. Ben, a slim man with a boyish face, sat beside her, wearing a gray suit and holding a typed sheet of questions.

"Is it possible for a good marriage to end in divorce?" he asked.

“I think it’s possible for a good marriage to end in divorce,” she said. “In a lot of ways, I think we don’t see our marriage as a failure.”

Ben nodded. He said that when they finalized their divorce the judge asked if there had been an “irretrievable breakdown,” and if they had tried to repair it. As if, Ben said, “there’s this thing and you were trying to do it, and it’s broken, and it’s failing, and it’s bad to fail, and so it’s bad, and so we should see if we can try to save it. And I’m worried that that’s a kind of fallacy, that we have an overly formal conception of what failure is.” Agnes listened with her hand over her mouth, as if restraining herself from jumping in with a thought. “I was going to ask Agnes this,” Ben went on, “but I’ll just throw it out to the group: Is divorce a failure?”

“A moral failure,” a student suggested. “Not living up to your promise.”



Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

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“I guess I just think more generally, like, we shouldn’t always be avoiding those sorts of failures,” Agnes said. She described marriage as “a promise not only to keep loving the person” but to “love them a lot, at any given time,” and it’s impossible to commit to that in advance.

Throughout the event, Ben seemed to recede. He kept pulling the discussion away from his own life toward increasingly academic problems. It was a testament to his generosity that although he didn't seem to feel comfortable with the project—he told the students he was an "under-sharer"—he was doing the best he could, because Agnes wanted to show their students how philosophy could apply to the most consequential decisions of their lives. Ben told me that the process of becoming a well-known public philosopher, as Agnes has, would "ethically devastate a lot of people." He went on, "For most of us, having fans and followers feeds terrible things in our soul. But Agnes doesn't have that. She's changed very little, as far as I can tell." She seemed immune to the damage, he said, because she saw each reader or audience member as a potential interlocutor, another person who could challenge her thinking. "It's not that she lacks interiority," he said. "It's that she has a low view of the significance of that interiority." As she saw it, thinking is not something that one person can do alone. It takes two people to have a thought.

For Christmas last year, Agnes and Arnold and the three children went to Pennsylvania to visit his family. Agnes couldn't stop coughing and sneezing. About a week earlier, she'd had a severe allergy attack, brought on by a cat, and the symptoms hadn't subsided. One night, she was making pita bread, coughing every few minutes, and Arnold was sitting at a table in the kitchen, grading papers on his laptop. They were sharing the same space, but Agnes felt as if they were in two separate worlds. She was reminded of a line from the Icelandic novel "Independent People," by Halldór Laxness, which she had just read: "Two human beings have such difficulty in understanding each other—there is nothing so tragical as two human beings."

The next day, when I visited Agnes and Arnold at his parents' house, she told him that, while making the pita, she had felt as if they were out of synch. She wished he had put down his laptop and talked to her. She was aware that something more purposeful could be happening, and the lack felt tragic. "He's not paying attention to what I want him to pay attention to," she said, of that moment. "He's not interested in what I want him to be interested in." She recognized that he had to grade papers, but she was still annoyed. "I'm, like, why didn't he do the grading earlier today?" she said. "I bet there was lots of time today when he was wasting time."

“That’s probably true,” Arnold said. We sat at the kitchen table, and he dipped the pita into hummus he had just blended. The boys were at the mall with his parents. “Also, the thing with the coughing and the sneezing is funny, because you’re clearly suffering in a pretty serious way,” he told Agnes, “and you have been for days. And, at this point, I’ve just faded it out. I just don’t hear it anymore.”

Agnes said that in moments of disconnection she repeats a little mantra to herself: “It’s fine—you can do this on your own. You can figure things out on your own.” But she knows it’s a lie. “I almost have a feeling of pleasure, like a sick pleasure, as I placate myself with the thought,” she told me.

I asked Agnes and Arnold if they still felt that their relationship gave them the capacity for radical transformation, as Agnes had told her students. “I think there was something right in that vision,” Agnes said, “but it has been so much harder than I thought it would be. To change—but also just to be in love, like, to relate in a really loving way to another person. It’s like once you start trying to do that you come up against all of your limits.” In her marriage with Ben, she hadn’t been aspiring toward any particular ideal, so her flaws didn’t feel as painful. “I think I never realized how fundamentally selfish I was before I met Arnold,” she said. “I’m just really not able to be much less selfish than I am.”

Arnold said he had never expected that he could become a new person. “For me, it was more, like, meeting Agnes was the experience of finally not going to waste.”

“Nothing about you changed, but you became oriented towards what was important, in some way,” Agnes explained.

Their marriage had ended up being more asymmetrical than they had expected. “Your entire philosophical career is a discussion of our marriage, in one way or another,” Arnold said. Agnes agreed. If their marriage was a kind of play, she was the central character, and the author, too.

A common refrain in their fights was whether Arnold, who became an assistant professor in 2021, should aspire to more. Agnes felt that he could write an extraordinary book about Aristotle, but he was content to read the

texts and share his interpretations with his students. “Arnold fundamentally sees life as, like, you’re supposed to find a place of contentment,” she said. “And his way of doing things often shows up to me as: he’s not working hard enough. And my way of doing things often shows up to him as: she’s incapable of being happy.”

Arnold clarified: “The source of my question is: What is the aim of work? It has to be something that’s not work. Aspiration can’t be infinite, as much as you would love it to be, because at some point you have to get to the value that you are supposed to be aspiring towards. And, once you’re there, that’s who you are.”

Agnes had just finished a draft of her second book, which fills in what she considers to be a significant omission in her first book: the degree to which aspiration depends on other people. The book examines the ways in which Socrates recognized our vulnerability and neediness and incompleteness. His greatest insight, Agnes believes, was that people are intellectually lonely—they live under an illusion of self-sufficiency. Dialogue was the only way out of their natural state. And yet the people who took up Socrates’ work, developing the field of philosophy, struggled to keep that insight in view. They went off and came up with theories on their own. Perhaps they thought that Socrates secretly possessed his insights all along, that he didn’t need other people to answer his questions, an assumption that Agnes thinks is misguided. “He was not doing this from a position of strength,” she said.

One chapter of the book is about Socratic love, and it builds on the talk Agnes gave her students in 2011, when she first fell in love with Arnold. She repeats the argument she made about Socrates’ vision of love as a kind of ladder, two lovers aspiring together to the same ideals, but she also contemplates what it means when the “company of the person one once chased with breathless abandon loses its thrill, the frequency of both sex and vigorous conversation decreases, and living together becomes a matter of routine. This supposedly ‘good case’ is, in its own way, also far from ideal.”

As their youngest son grew older, and there were fewer urgent distractions, Agnes became aware that marriage is a thing that can die. She described the experience as “persistently ignoring the thought that there’s something

wrong. You just turn away from something and then keep turning away from it, and eventually you can't see it anymore."

Her parents, who emigrated from Hungary when she was four, were united by a shared sense of struggle; they were trying to adapt to a new culture, with little money or command of the language. The structure of marriage suited them well. Agnes felt that she had imported the conventional trappings of marriage without evaluating which features remained relevant. She worried, she said, that she and Arnold were "losing the spirit of marriage for the sake of the convention." They labored under the shadow of the transcendence of their early romance. "I'll be, like, 'Why can't we get back to that?' " Agnes said. "And Arnold will be, like, 'That was never there.' He is offended by my attempt to go back in time. And I feel like he is taking away the foundation of our relationship and telling me that our lives are built on a lie."

After seven years of marriage, they watched Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage," a portrait of a couple as they struggle to understand the limits and possibilities of their relationship in the course of a decade. "It's extraordinary that two people can live a whole life together without—" the wife's mother says. "Without touching," the wife answers. The couple divorce, but their relationship continues, without the distance and artifice that marked their marriage. The ending is not widely viewed as a happy one, but both Agnes and Arnold felt that the couple, through their divorce, had discovered how to be connected to each other in a real way. Agnes is planning to write her next book about the show, as well as about what she calls her "philosophical marriage." The show clarified her feelings of estrangement. Until she met Arnold, she said, "I didn't realize how lonely I was. You don't see it. It's like the air that you breathe, but when you see that you can be relieved of it there is this weird way in which the relationship exacerbates the loneliness."

For Agnes, loneliness was the experience of having thoughts she wanted to communicate but felt unable to, because she knew that her words would come out wrong or be misinterpreted. Whatever she said would be a distortion of what she was feeling. "And that experience is almost a kind of madness—the experience of not being able to settle on a view about how anything is," she said.

I told Agnes that once, when asked to share an inspiring quote for a friend's wedding, I picked one from Rainer Maria Rilke: "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other." In hindsight, my choice seemed silly, and I guessed she would agree. "Yeah, it feels like a way of reassuring yourself that some of the flaws in the relationship are actually really beautiful," she said, adding that this is "why Socrates thought the poets didn't know what they were talking about." The ineffable wisdom they wrote of—inaccessible to others, because it was so mysterious and private—sounded to Socrates a lot like ignorance, she said. The idea that a marriage should hold space for each person's incommunicable core, she believed, "comes from this pessimism where it's, like, Look, at the end of the day we know we can't really help one another, so the best thing we can do is not interfere too much."

Arnold aspired to rid the marriage of loneliness, too, but he defined it differently from Agnes. "For me, togetherness is something like: imagine being with somebody where it would never occur to you to say anything but the truth," he told me. "There's no strategy, no attempt to get anything." He continued, "Whereas Agnes's loneliness is a barrier between two people, for me loneliness is almost like an internal problem. How can I manage to find reasons to tell the truth? Or how can I make contact with the idea of being honest?"

Marriage is "an institution *committed* to the dulling of the feelings," Susan Sontag once wrote. "The whole point of marriage is repetition." Agnes and Arnold felt that they had entered marriage without clearly thinking through what the institution was actually for. For many couples, marriage ends up being about making a family, and, when it fails to meet other needs, the couple lovingly and generously lets it fail. But Agnes was uncomfortable with the prospect of a relationship that had lost its aspirational character. She wondered what it would look like if she and Arnold integrated new romantic relationships into their marriage. They would all keep talking about philosophy, but with fresh ideas in the mix. They asked each other whether it would violate the terms of their marriage if they became romantically involved with other people. "We didn't think there was any good reason other than the usual conventions of marriage to answer that question with a yes," she said. They referred to their new agreement as the Variation.

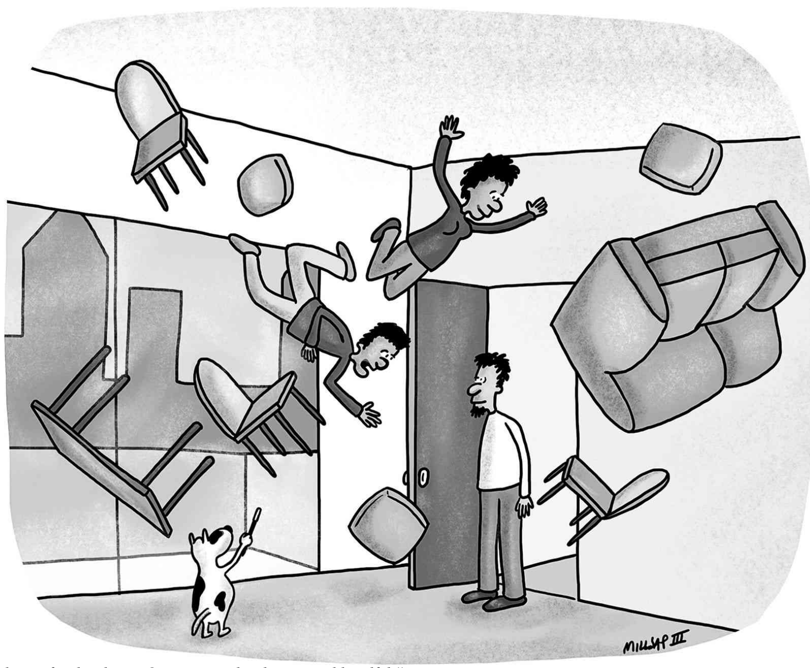
Agnes was struck by how bound by convention she'd been when she divorced Ben. "I was almost saying something like 'Look, I left my husband for this other man, but he's the one person—the one and only person—and I promise I won't do it again.' " It was as if she had been unconsciously trying to justify a kind of social dogma: that you can love only one person at a time.

Agnes said that sometimes colleagues tell her, of her relationship with Arnold, "I'm so glad it worked out." She finds that form of thinking alien. "It's a very narrative, novelistic approach to my life, and the only area of my life that I see in such a progressive way is the pursuit of knowledge." The proof of success or failure is her insights, she said, not the plot of her life.

After our conversation in Pennsylvania, Agnes said Arnold worried that they'd given me the impression that their marriage was a success story. At the time, I had expressed that, if cooking pita alone felt tragic, then things seemed to be going well, but I had perhaps overlooked the way that tiny kitchen conflicts can expose relationship fault lines that feel elemental. When we talked again, I asked them about the ways in which they weren't as happy as they appeared to be. They spoke to me on Zoom from Agnes's office, which she had turned into a kind of magical kindergarten: bright stars, circular mirrors, and L.E.D. lights hung from ropes wrapped in yarn of different colors; the walls were covered in fabrics featuring flowery blobs; a table had large polka dots. "It's not like this thing that we do, which is constantly talk about philosophy, is a happy activity," Arnold told me. "It's just as difficult and problematic and fraught an activity as what I take it many couples would do together."

"I guess I would go even a little further than Arnold in saying that this territory is pretty often painful," Agnes said. She was sitting at her desk, wearing a pink dress with large llamas on it. Arnold had pulled up a chair beside her. "There are certain reliable circumstances that will make it non-painful," she went on. "I can tell you exactly what they are: it's when Arnold is explaining Aristotle to me." She felt that no one could explain anything as well as he explained Aristotle. He was always patient, never defensive; his interpretations weren't tied up in his own ego. "The way we first got together was by talking about Aristotle," she said, "and yet I just thought, Well, yeah, but that was incidental. I could have been teaching a class on

anything. It turns out, no, it was actually really important that it was Aristotle."

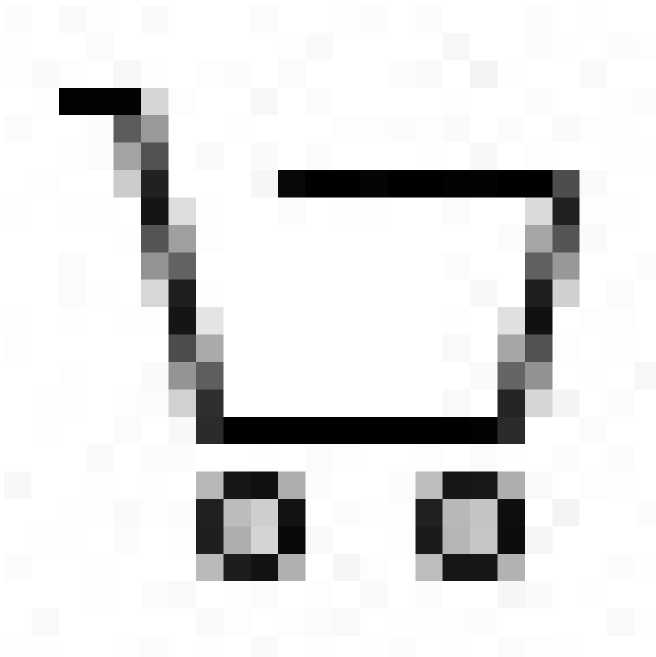


"Apologies for the clutter. Our new pup has been a real handful."
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

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In her marriage with Ben, Agnes had never wondered whether the relationship was going O.K. But, with Arnold, she said, “we’ve often had the kind of stress and struggle of, like, is this working?” She continued, “In that way, it’s a less happy relationship than the one I had with Ben.”

She added that, when she and Arnold fought, they could rely on Ben to provide an objective perspective. He would try to think through the problem from both of their points of view, rather than reflexively offering validation. (She said that she does the same for Ben when he discusses his own relationships.)

“The phrase coming to mind is ‘immaculate divorce,’ ” I said. “A divorce without grief or sorrow or pain.”

“I actually think that’s a pretty good description,” Agnes said. She had been taking notes throughout the conversation and wrote something down. “This has come up in conversations where we’ve had dark moments and Arnold is, like, ‘Look, if we have to get divorced, we’ll do it correctly.’ ” No one would feel trapped, morally or practically. She imagined marriage as a “bundle of services”: along with love, there’s security, friendship, child rearing, financial support, and assistance with one’s work. “Arnold is sort of saying, ‘Look, we can unbundle it.’ Marriage has a lot of stuff packed into it, but if

you knew what job each bit was doing, then, if you lose the marriage you could still potentially reconstitute the bits." She added, "The only barrier to our getting divorced is our wanting to continue to be married."

In an episode of "Scenes from a Marriage," the wife comes to ask the husband to sign divorce papers, and he, realizing that he is bound to the marriage in a deeper way than he'd known, locks his wife in his office and then strikes her in the face. Agnes and Arnold's marriage was set up so that no one would ever feel locked in. But Arnold also identified with the husband's blind panic at the prospect of losing the relationship that has given his life meaning. "It's not that we live without that feeling," he said. "It's that we are trying to manage that feeling."

"So it's like we're always breaking up?" Agnes asked.

"No, it's like the philosophy-is-a-preparation-for-death thing," he said, quoting one of Socrates' most famous lines. "Maybe our marriage is a preparation for divorce. The thing we're trying to do is approach that fact—that another person could be so deeply tied to the meaning of your life that, without the relationship, life might feel meaningless." He was uncomfortable with how dependent this made him feel, and he thought he should somehow overcome it. According to Aristotle, "Happiness belongs to the self-sufficient." He was striving to fulfill that ideal. "It's something that I'm aiming for, and it's something that I don't have yet," he said.

"I think a lot of our fights boil down to Arnold thinking he's already arrived at the final condition where he doesn't need me anymore," Agnes said, "and me trying to point out to him that he's not as great as he thinks he is, so that he can see that he actually does still need me."

Arnold smiled slightly, his eyes cast down.

"And that actually is a way of understanding how marriage is a preparation for divorce," Agnes went on. "It's a preparation for the time when you won't need another person in order to think." She said that maybe that would be the title of her book about marriage: "Marriage Is a Preparation for Divorce." She had written the line down in her notebook.

“It’s this idea that we want marriage to have a point,” Arnold said. People talk about the aim of their careers, but they don’t use that sort of vocabulary for marriage. “When Socrates says that philosophy is a preparation for death, he’s very clear that he doesn’t mean you’re supposed to commit suicide. It’s just that there’s some way in which philosophy could stand up to the task of making you able to deal with death when it comes.”

“The corresponding claim,” Agnes said, “would be that somehow the project of marriage would make you capable of being alone.”

Sometimes, when Agnes discusses her marriage with Yelena Baraz, her best friend, Baraz gets frustrated by her philosophical approach. Agnes said, “I’m, like, O.K., what is jealousy? Am I entitled to feel it? Is there something I’m getting right in feeling this way?” Baraz wants to comfort her. “I feel like she’s treating herself as a guinea pig or a case study,” Baraz told me, “and I want to relate to her as a person I care about who is in distress.” But Agnes is impatient with the “let’s-get-through-the-next-fifteen-minutes kind of approach. The way that I think about it is: there’s no other time when you could understand this thing. Devastating problems in your life can also be *interesting*, and they can interest you as they’re happening to you and as they’re causing you intense pain.” When Baraz tries to look for a cure, “I’m, like, No,” Agnes said. “This is my chance to understand it. This is the time when we can be serious about our lives.”

Agnes eventually wants to write about unconventional family arrangements like hers, but she has also noticed that when people write about such topics they are both celebratory and defensive, as if they were trying to put a good face on it. She doesn’t want to draw conclusions until she can “grasp the real thing in all its tragic splendor,” she told me. When I asked about the nature of the tragedy, she sent me a list of sixteen points. “However many people you have, it is never enough” was the first point on the list. “One is not enough (this is part of the tragedy of monogamy), but neither is two, or three.” She went on to describe how differently she and Ben and Arnold dealt with their fears of aging and death and their unspoken wishes for their children; the realization that honesty is often brutal and intolerable; the understanding that passion is unsustainable. She felt as if she were constantly trying to open their eyes to the tragic aspects of their lives, and they weren’t seeing it. There was also the problem of equilibrium: each

relationship settles into its own patterns, a set of interlocking arrangements based on each person's insecurities and needs, which become nearly impossible to alter, even more so among three. "So many things get 'let go of,' " she wrote, "rather than really resolved."

I asked Agnes if there was a version of aspiration that takes the form of becoming a person who accepts what is good enough. Life is fragile and terrifying, and so much of it can be taken away. Can you aspire to know how to fully inhabit a relationship, a life, that feels like a plateau? "I think grateful acceptance can be loving, but I think exacting demands can also be loving," she responded in an e-mail. "Marriage has an amazing PR team, for 2 decades it has been continuously telling me, 'This is good, this is how it is supposed to be, this should count as enough, lots of people don't get this much, you should accept this and move on to other concerns'—and I feel increasingly emboldened to say, 'No thanks, I'd rather keep working and searching and striving.' " ♦

By Jordi Graupera

By Joshua Rothman

By Joshua Rothman

By Marion Renault

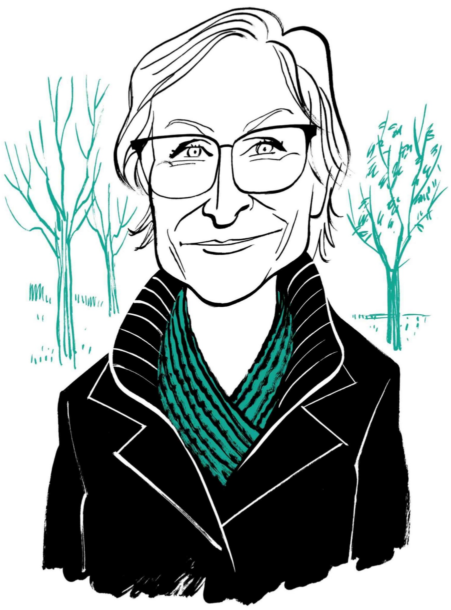
Reboot Dept.

- **Jane Lynch, Born Not to Serve**

Jane Lynch, Born Not to Serve

The actor, now starring in the reboot of "Party Down," strolls around Central Park with a pal and details why she wasn't cut out for catering.

By Rachel Syme



The actor Jane Lynch (sixty-two, ostrich-tall, short platinum hair in meringue-like peaks) met up with a friend, the podcast host George Hahn (fifty-two, clean-shaven, smart peacoat), at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-second Street the other day.

"I love your hair!" Lynch exclaimed. "Who did it for you?"

Hahn ran his fingers through his boingy coif. "Oh, this *bar-ber* I went to," he said, drawing out the word. He offered Lynch his arm, and they strolled into Central Park. "I wanted to sit in a barber's chair, you know?" he continued. "The sound of clippers! The dude chitchat! I love the smell of Barbicide and Pinaud. It makes me want to wear Sansabelt pants."

"The training they have to have to become a barber?" Lynch said. "They're not fucking around."

"The best barbers have really been under the wing of masters," Hahn said. "The master and apprentice is a relationship that we're really losing."

"Do you know Tom Nichols?" Lynch asked. "He wrote a book called 'The Death of Expertise,' about how everybody's, like, opining about things they don't know about."

"Like me, on MSNBC," Hahn said, with a little snort. (He is a regular guest on the network.)

"No! You're a generalist," she said. "But you are *basically* smart."

Lynch lives with her wife, Jennifer Cheyne, in the California wine-country hamlet of Montecito. "My neighbors are Meghan and Prince Harry," she said. "I haven't actually seen them. I *have* seen Rob Lowe around, though. He's a man of the people." Hahn has lived in Manhattan for twenty years, except for a sojourn in his home town of Cleveland. "It was a clarifying experiment," he said. "I had become one of those hackneyed old queens who was getting bitter about how the city was changing. After about a year, I missed it."

Lynch and Hahn met and began what Lynch calls "a beautiful love story" two years ago, after she came across Hahn's grooming tips on Twitter. "Back then, I was on there *big time*," she said.

Hahn fanned out his free hand. "Jane: The Twitter Years!" he said. "That's the memoir chapter."

"George would shave every morning, live on Twitter," Lynch said. "And he uses a real razor as opposed to a plastic one."

"Actually, we met on Grindr," Hahn joked.

"I should have been a gay man," Lynch said.

"You kind of are!" Hahn said.

"And *you're* kind of a gay woman," Lynch said.

Talk turned to acting work—and to the odd jobs the two did to support themselves early on. Lynch is currently starring in the Starz reboot of "Party Down," which ran for two seasons, beginning in 2009. The show follows a ragtag team of Hollywood cater waiters who serve tuna tartlets to rich people while wearing pink bow ties and dreaming about their big breaks. Lynch plays Constance Carmel, a has-been B-movie actor who lucks into marrying a wealthy movie producer, who dies before signing a prenup. In the reboot, Constance, now a well-to-do widow, owns the catering company.

"It was a workplace comedy that kind of got lost at the time," Lynch said. "But we didn't jump the shark. It was just the same thing every week. Same shit, different party."

"I did some time as the cater waiter," Hahn said.

"I was a terrible server," Lynch said. "I did some temp work in Chicago, where I answered phones, and I was pretty good at the switchboard."

Hahn mimed picking up a phone and affected a transatlantic accent: "*Applewhite, Bibberman, Widdicombe, and Black!* "

"What's that from?" Lynch asked.

" 'Auntie Mame,' " Hahn said. "Now, *you* would be an amazing Mame."

"Thank you," Lynch said. "I looked into doing it, and then I read the play, and it does go all over the place."

"That guy who wrote 'Mame' was a servant," Hahn said. "Some of it is autobiographical. He did have an eccentric aunt who lived in the Village."

"How do you know this?" Lynch asked.

"I'm a nerd, and I'm gay," Hahn said.

As the duo walked on, Lynch told Hahn that her wife had recently rescued a lame horse named Athena.

“I follow so many animals on Instagram,” Hahn said. “I learned horses love to play with each other.”

“Well, our horse is horny,” Lynch said. “She’s, like, screaming out to the boys in the field. She has to eat these calming cookies.”

Hahn patted Lynch’s arm. “*I* should try those calming cookies,” he said. ♦

By Rachel Aviv

By James Lasdun

By Caitlin Reid

By Ricardo Nuila

Shouts & Murmurs

- I Have Questions for ChatGPT

By Alyssa Brandt

> ChatGPT enables users to ask questions or tell a story, and the bot will respond with relevant, natural-sounding answers and topics.
>
> —*Quoted in Forbes.*

Hi, Chat,

A friend gifted me a fancy designer bucket hat that she swore she didn't want anymore. Then we had a misunderstanding, and she ghosted my birthday party. Then I blocked her. And put a potato in her tailpipe. And slept with her ex. Can our friendship be saved? If not, do I have to give back the hat?

Why are there suddenly so many different kinds of Oreos? What are Birthday Cake Flavor Creme Oreos really like? Occasionally sampling a blueberry in the produce section is one thing—and, before you say a word, have you seen the price of blueberries lately? If I'm plunking down eight dollars on a container of jumbo organic blueberries, I'm making sure they're worth it. But I can't have a full package of Birthday Cake Flavor Creme Oreos hanging around the house because the manager made me buy the whole bag again. So, are they like Golden Oreos? Because—pro tip for you, Chat—Golden Oreos are just O.K.

Why didn't I go to Oberlin?

Should I paint the small bathroom Benjamin Moore's Antique Pearl or Venetian Marble? The swatches have been taped up for months, but you know how color changes with the light—of course you do!—so it's been hard to decide. One shade is a little cooler, one a little warmer. My family refuses to discuss it any further, and they've begun to (unfairly) characterize my gentle queries every time they come out of the small bathroom as "gotcha" questions. They've actually stopped using the small bathroom altogether, which is fine, because none of them remember to jiggle the handle just so (even though I posted a detailed schematic on the wall and have shown them how to do it numerous times). So the color choice is up to me, but I could use a second opinion. What do you think?

Once, when I was sixteen and was walking along a tree-lined street in the Village with my mom, we saw Matthew Broderick on the sidewalk, and she told me to go up to him and say hi, and I was mortified because . . . who does that? He probably would have been really nice about it. He wasn't even with what's-her-face yet. Why didn't I just do it? Maybe I would have said something clever, and he would have laughed, and now I'd be living with him and our adorable children in our adorable brownstone on that adorable tree-lined street. Not that I care anymore, but my mom wants to know: Why didn't I listen to her?

Why did I read both "A Gentleman in Moscow" and "The Lincoln Highway" when I didn't really like "Rules of Civility"?

Why didn't I get those expensive boots from that shop on Fifty-fifth Street all those years ago? I really wanted them, and I bet I'd still have them, and they'd be perfectly broken in by now and be the kind of boots that other women notice when I walk by. The kind of boots that make other women say, "Excuse me, do you mind if I ask where you got your boots?" Allowing me to casually reply, "I can't remember," even though I do *so* remember. And not just midtown women but SoHo women would ask me this. But, no, I bought a less expensive pair that I gave away, like, three pairs ago. Why do I cheap out when, really, I'm worth the extra bucks, especially if I prorate the cost over a lifetime of wear? I'm worth two dollars a day, aren't I, ChatGPT? ♦

By Justin Hook

By Souvankham Thammavongsa

By Eric Farwell

By Monica McDonough

Tables for Two

- Dynamite Persian Food at Eyval

By [Hannah Goldfield]

I’ll start with the cocktails at Eyval, a Persian restaurant that opened last year—and so should you. Gin tends not to agree with me, and yet I couldn’t help but steal sips of a friend’s orange-blossom Negroni, a cold and viscous concoction that lingered on my tongue and in my memory (I can taste it now!), the intoxicating, floral perfume of the orange-blossom water achieving thrilling alchemy with the herbal gin, bitter Aperol, and sweet vermouth.



Lamb ribs are glazed in date and tamarind and finished with walnuts, barberries, and pickled hot chilies.

For myself, I ordered a Conference of the Birds—a sour-candy-like mix made with more orange-blossom water and Aperol, plus vodka, lemon, and honey—and the tart, smoky Limoo Margarita, featuring mezcal infused with *limoo amani* (dried lime), an ingredient used in Iran in soups and stews, the rim of the glass coated in coarse salt and flakes of mild, fruity Aleppo pepper.



The kitchen's spin on the eggplant dish known as kashke bademjan involves roasting an eggplant whole and drizzling it in thick squiggles of salted whey, topped with fried garlic and onions, mint oil, and fresh mint.



One of the things that sets Eyval apart from Sofreh, the Brooklyn Persian restaurant where Eyval's chef last worked, is its inspired riffs on street food, including kebabs.

I'm happy to report that the dynamite drinks portended dynamite food. Eyval was opened by Ali Saboor, a former chef at Sofreh—the other best Persian restaurant in Brooklyn, if not all of New York—whose owners helped finance this new place. You can choose between two options for bread or, better yet, get both—an oblong *barbari*, with grooves like a

racetrack and a speckling of nigella and sesame seeds, and a round *komaj*, a soft, sweet bun made from a dough enriched with milk and eggs and seasoned with turmeric, perforated into quarters, brushed with butter, and adorned with cumin seeds. Both are perfect for scooping up dips, including a sharp whipped feta with walnuts and radish and a broccoli-rabe *borani:* strained, salted yogurt topped with blanched florets, an herb purée, pistachio, coriander seed, and chili oil and flakes.



A slightly sweet bread called komaj (left), baked from dough enriched with milk and eggs and seasoned with turmeric, comes perforated for easy tearing into quarters.

The Green Tahini Salad, a mix of Little Gem, frisée, radicchio, radish, and seasonal fruit (navel and blood orange, recently), is elevated to transcendence by the inclusion of warm medjool dates, a powerful kick from grilled serrano pepper in the tahini dressing (which also contains honey and mint), and a generous sprinkle of toasted sesame seeds. "Kashke Bademjan" appears in quotes on the menu because it's an interpretation of the traditional appetizer: an eggplant lightly fried and roasted whole, the charred, silky flesh then drizzled with *kashk*, made from cooked yogurt, and finished with crushed walnuts, fried garlic and onion, mint oil, and fresh mint. Fat crosshatched coins of supple trumpet-mushroom stem, skewer-grilled and served with pickled beechwood mushrooms over beluga lentils simmered in fenugreek-spiked cream, were reminiscent of scallops and even more delicious than the actual scallop kebab, though that was nice, too, four

plump bronzed mollusks over a luscious emulsion of tamarind pulp and squid ink.



Eyval occupies a somewhat strangely sprawling corner storefront, with three dining rooms, in Bushwick.



Desserts include rosewater cream puffs, dusted in crushed pistachio.

There's also a chicken kebab, as well as a ground-beef-and-lamb iteration, both excellent. (One thing that distinguishes Eyval from Sofreh is inspired riffs on street-food staples.) But, unless you're ordering the whole menu (a valid choice), I'd prioritize the lamb ribs, sticky-sweet with date and

tamarind, scattered with walnut, barberries, and pickled chilies, and the larger dishes, including a kebab-inspired, flawlessly grilled rack of lamb, sliced into beautiful, buttery chops, served with a bowl of perfectly steamed, rose-and-saffron-scented basmati rice. Saboor’s version of *ghormeh sabzi* is a particular showstopper, a braised veal shank (don’t forget to check the bone for marrow) crowned with a crisp disk of herbed-rice *tahdig* and rising regally from a rich stew of tender kidney beans and melty greens and alliums, including parsley, spinach, and leeks, plus fenugreek and *limoo amani*. Plucking out a puckered leathery lime and eating it whole, sticky and sour, left me feeling as lucky as if I’d found the baby in a king cake. Speaking of cake, desserts included a squishy square of it, soaked in cardamom syrup and topped with saffron ice cream, second only to the *noon e khamei*, ethereal, crackly choux pastry sandwiching dreamy rosewater cream. *(Dishes $5-$45.)* ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

By Pat Cassels

Television

- **Spring Television Preview**

By Rachel Syme

In a sardine-packed spring season, March 26 might be the most crowded release date of them all. That Sunday night, the scheming, snivelling, showboating Roy family returns to HBO for a fourth—and final—season of **"Succession."** Will Kendall seal his Oedipal victory at last? Will Tom pack up his merino turtlenecks and leave Shiv for good? Will Cousin Greg ruin an entire evening owing to sheer incompetence? All will be revealed—likely with the help of elegant yet brutal monologues that leave you both wincing and wanting more.

On that same Sunday, on Showtime, the twisty **"Yellowjackets"** returns for a second season of mayhem and teen-age hormones in a remote Canadian forest. The show, which follows two story lines—the ghastly saga of a nineteen-nineties high-school girls' soccer team that may or may not turn into a cannibalistic cult after its plane crashes, and the present-day adventures of several crash survivors—last left viewers on a nerve-fraying cliffhanger. With new cast members including Lauren Ambrose and Elijah Wood, this season will surely provide a bucket of fresh blood.

There's more! March 26 also brings **"Great Expectations,"** a splashy adaptation, from FX on Hulu, of Dickens's epic about an orphan named Pip and the characters he meets in Victorian London when he comes into unexpected wealth. Olivia Colman, perhaps channelling her barmy performance in "The Favourite," plays Miss Havisham, a mad spinster who won't remove her tattered wedding dress. And, on Paramount+, Kiefer Sutherland returns to television in **"Rabbit Hole,"** a corporate-spy thriller with echoes of both "24" and "Michael Clayton."

Elsewhere on the calendar, not only is there something for everyone but there's an excessive amount of it. A fan of musicals? There are three! **"Up Here,"** on Hulu (March 24), follows two young New Yorkers, in 1999, as they perform original songs written by the team behind "Frozen." On April 6, Paramount+ débuts **"Grease: Rise of the Pink Ladies,"** a singing and dancing confetti cannon of poodle skirts and muscle cars, and on April 7 the comedy **"Schmigadoon"** is back, on Apple TV+, this time with tunes inspired by Broadway hits of the sixties and seventies ("Chicago" and "Cabaret" jokes abound). Want a period piece? PBS has you covered with **"Tom Jones"** (April 30), a high-polished take on Henry Fielding's 1749

novel, or you can turn to Netflix for **“Queen Charlotte”** (May 4), a frothy “Bridgerton” prequel.

If tense drama is what you’re after, you can find it—nearly everywhere. On Amazon Prime, there’s **“Dead Ringers”** (April 21), a remake of David Cronenberg’s 1988 thriller about psychotic twin gynecologists (Rachel Weisz plays both siblings). On April 6, on Netflix, things get ugly in **“Beef,”** a dramedy about two strangers (Ali Wong and Steven Yeun) who become mutually obsessed after a road-rage incident. On March 17, Amazon Prime premières **“Swarm,”** a potboiler about a woman (Dominique Fishback) who is dangerously infatuated with a pop star, and HBO Max premières **“Love & Death”** (April 27), in which Elizabeth Olsen plays a housewife accused of axe murder. In **“City on Fire”** (May 12), Apple TV+’s big glossy bet of the season, a 2003 Central Park shooting kicks off a multi-borough mystery involving arson, rock stars, and real estate. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Sarah Larson

By Richard Brody

By Ian Crouch

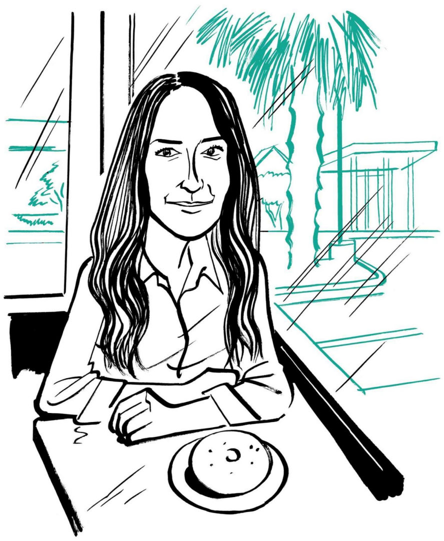
The Pictures

- [Strawberry Doughnuts and Half-Smoked Butts]

Strawberry Doughnuts and Half-Smoked Butts

The seventeen-year-old heroine of "Palm Trees and Power Lines," the director Jamie Dack's début feature film, navigates between bleak choices.

By Dana Goodyear



Jamie Dack's first feature-length film, "Palm Trees and Power Lines," tells the story of Lea, an aimless seventeen-year-old marking time in the enervated suburbs of southern California. The summer before twelfth grade, she meets Tom. He is twice her age, and promises escape; she does not see that he is setting a trap.

Not long ago, Dack was outside Granny's Donuts, in a mini-mall in the small city of Downey, California. She is thirty-four, with long wavy hair, and was holding a laptop with a puppy sticker on it. Early in the film, which she co-wrote with Audrey Findlay, Lea and her friend Amber go to the doughnut shop. Before they go in, they rummage through the mall's ashtray and take a couple of puffs of someone else's discarded butt. "That is something I literally did with my friend," Dack said. "We would go to the strip mall and we weren't old enough to buy cigarettes and we would look in

the ashtray for the longest one there and smoke it." She paused. "It's so gross. I would literally do that."

Dack went into the shop and looked at the case. "They don't have my usual go-to, strawberry frosted," she said wistfully. She ordered a plain glazed and sat down at a table with a shiny red top in front of a large window. Over her shoulder, through the window, was a palm tree in front of a car wash, next to a fast-food place—all of it garlanded with crisscrossing electrical wires. In the film, Amber—who is played by an actual teen-ager, discovered on Instagram—does obscene things to a cream doughnut. Lea, eating a strawberry frosted, protests, laughing.

Dack said, "It's summer break. There's nothing for her to do. They're wandering around. They're digging for cigarettes. And they're getting doughnuts. Doughnuts feel very childlike to me. They're trying to act older than they are, but Lea comes in here and just wants a pink doughnut with sprinkles. The friend is the one making a sexual joke with the doughnut. But Lea is the one that's going to go off and do this real sexual thing, not her friend."

Dack grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, and went to a large public high school. "I became best friends right away with this girl that I met on the bus going to school," she said. "She was definitely more experienced than me in many ways. She smoked cigarettes regularly, and her parents let her do this. She bought me weed for my birthday when I was sixteen, and I had never smoked weed before. She had a boyfriend and all these things. That was my Amber."

When Dack was seventeen, she started dating a thirty-three-year-old man she met on an Amtrak train. "It's crazy that he was my age now. What would that even be like, to be with a seventeen-year-old? I thought it was really cool at the time, and totally normal. I was, like, He likes me because I'm really mature," she said. "He and I had a connection. Whatever."

Dack stayed friends with the man for years, but writing about her experience prompted her to cut off contact. "It started to feel like maybe it wasn't as O.K. as I thought, and maybe there was a way in which I had been manipulated," she said. "I wasn't groomed the way my protagonist is, but I

wanted to explore what could have happened if this man's intentions had been different. I used the protagonist as a proxy for my younger self. I was this very vulnerable teen-age girl." She plucked off a piece of doughnut and ate it, then tucked the rest away in a waxed-paper bag.

"Palm Trees and Power Lines," which won a directing award at Sundance in 2022 and is nominated for four Independent Spirit Awards, began as a series of photographs taken around San Diego and greater L.A. "Can I show you something?" Dack asked, opening her laptop. She clicked through images she'd shot on her mother's old 35-mm. Minolta: nineteen-seventies cars in front of nineteen-eighties stucco houses, power lines, doughnut shops. "It's these places where things are forgotten," she said. The images were a conduit to her own teen-age malaise. Her goal for the film, she said, was that you'd be able to press Pause on any frame and you'd want it to be a photograph on your wall.

The morning rush at Granny's was over. At the next table, a young man with a backpack and a sleeping roll sat quietly eating a doughnut.

"We should just go to the mall and look at the teen-age girls," Dack said. "I love doing that! Even after writing this movie, I love observing teen-age girls." ♦

By Rachel Aviv

By James Lasdun

By Caitlin Reid

By Ricardo Nuila

The Theatre

- [A Minor Play by Lorraine Hansberry Gets Lost in a Major Revival]
- [“Life of Pi” Comes to Broadway]
- [Spring Theatre Preview]

A Minor Play by Lorraine Hansberry Gets Lost in a Major Revival

Oscar Isaac and Rachel Brosnahan star in “The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window.”

By Helen Shaw



Even though there are big stars in “The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window”—the Marvel (among other things) actor Oscar Isaac and the “Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” actress Rachel Brosnahan—the center of the play’s solar system is Lorraine Hansberry. There are few playwrights who, decades after their death, still seem so present and luminous. Hansberry died in 1965, when she was only thirty-four, yet we’re still exploring her continuing impact, still looking to her for illumination. Since 2017, three major biographies and a documentary have examined both her artistry and her activism, and last year the sculptor Alison Saar unveiled a statue of Hansberry in Times Square, which invited passersby to sit with her in quiet, bronze communion. Meanwhile, the theatre world produces Hansberry’s masterpiece, “A Raisin in the Sun,” her drama about housing discrimination in Chicago, over and over (most recently at the Public Theatre in 2022), and

directors comb through her short catalogue, hoping to find some hidden diamond that history thought was glass.

Despite the change of setting from Chicago's South Side to New York's Greenwich Village, structurally "Sign" follows the approximate pattern of "Raisin": a young marriage is in trouble, and, for the headstrong husband, some key disillusion looms. Sidney (Isaac) and his often skittish wife, Iris (Brosnahan), are dealing with Iris's discoveries in analysis, though Sidney, a nervy intellectual who's contemptuous of psychotherapy, would rather imagine his "Mountain Girl" barefoot on a hillside than listen to her actual complaints. Their cramped apartment is a crossroads, with the door always swinging wide for assorted types, such as their socialist buddy Alton (Julian De Niro), Iris's conservative older sister, Mavis (Miriam Silverman), and an existentially blasé playwright, David (Glenn Fitzgerald). Discussion is hectic and often circular. After being persuaded to embrace activism in the arty newspaper he publishes, Sidney hangs a campaign sign in his window for Wally O'Hara (Andy Grotelueschen), an appealing populist running for a city post.

Anne Kauffman's mega-production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music treats the flawed but fascinating "Sign" with the grandeur of a major work, sometimes to its detriment. Isaac and Brosnahan possess a certain Hollywood magnetism, and they enter heavy with glamour, accentuated by the rather too graceful clothes designed for them by Brenda Abbandandolo. The set, created by the Dots design collective, has its own spaceship-style gravity: a huge wraparound metal scaffolding lifts an entire exquisite apartment ten feet in the air, fire escapes extending both above and below. Heft and luxury, though, is a counterproductive approach for this seams-still-showing play. "Sign" is a social comedy that turns abruptly tragic in its last third, and it needs to feel like farce as long as it can, with Village eccentrics popping in and out, clambering on the couch, butting into one another's relationships. Staging everything inside a Death Star armature weighs that fleetness down.

An essay Hansberry wrote for the *Times* just before "The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window" opened, in October, 1964, explains that the drama is a portrait of the "engagé," her way of describing the socially conscious but insufficiently radical. "The silhouette of the Western intellectual poised in

hesitation before the flames of involvement was an accurate symbolism of some of my closest friends," she wrote, "some of whom crossed each other leaping in and out, for instance, of the Communist party." This analysis explains her tart, even bitter tone in "Sign"—social goads are not necessarily supposed to feel good. The group's Village microworld is diverse, but people switch their tolerance on and off: whether it's about Alton's Blackness, David's queerness, or Sidney's Jewishness, someone always makes an ugly comment. Hansberry was serious about prodding complacent liberals into action, though, most famously in a 1963 meeting with Robert Kennedy, when she warned him that he needed to make a moral commitment to Black life. The F.B.I. must not have liked that kind of talk, because it had been maintaining a dossier on her since she was twenty-two; when this thousand-page secret file was posted online, in 2015, it became, in an odd way, the first of her recent major biographies.

The original "Sign" ran for a hundred and one performances on Broadway—the final performance was just two days before she died. It wasn't a notorious failure: reception ranged from stung ("a vicious sitting in judgment on others," Richard Gilman wrote) to respectfully mixed. Although the political sequences in the *BAM* production lack the clarity of that *Times* essay, you do glimpse, obliquely, what life might have been like for Hansberry herself in her earlier Village days. She suffered from stomach ulcers, just as Sidney does; she was married to an idealistic Jewish man, just as Iris is; she was a gay playwright, a little like David. And her picture of being a woman in that world is drawn in fire.

Iris, Mavis, and their third sister, the late-appearing Gloria (Gus Birney), a call girl, have a collective witnessing-and-suffering function: their last name is Parodus, which, Mavis tells Sidney, is the ancient Greek term for "the chorus," as in a group of performers who comment on the action. (It's actually a term for a type of choral ode, but Sidney wouldn't know that, either.) Here, the sisters are a proving ground for hypocrisy, since the men's ideals collapse the minute they come into contact with a real, rather than imagined, woman. Alton's class solidarity can't expand to include Gloria's sex work—"I don't want white man's leavings, Sidney. Not now. Not ever," he cries, revolted—and Sidney's mushy transcendentalism succeeds only if Iris plays his nature-girl prop. A feminist can't bite into any part of this bohemian sandwich without hitting tinfoil. Wally jokes, "A woman's place

is in the oven," but Sidney can be worse. After asking Iris for her thoughts on his paper, he snaps at her, "Where did you get the idea you know enough about these things to pass judgment on them?" In a habit that's excruciatingly recognizable, Sidney also insists on playing his banjo, plinketing and plonketing away when others are trying to talk. *That guy.*

Hansberry's touch was shaky in "Sign": her ear for elevated aria sometimes fails her, her plotting can move in jerks, and she takes weird, self-conscious swipes at David's avant-garde theatre. Still, she did not write Sidney as quite this irritating. For one thing, he's supposed to be funny. The script's character description focusses on his argumentative humor ("a clown—who laughs at himself as much as the world"), but Isaac, ever a leading man, can't execute the required self-abnegating comedy. Nor is there any erotic spark between Isaac's Sidney and Brosnahan's plaintive but oddly inert Iris, so his grabbing at her becomes accidentally unpleasant. We feel ten times more heat onstage when Mavis, supposedly the buttoned-up matron, unleashes a killer monologue, including a blistering diatribe from "Medea"—in Greek. Silverman is as simultaneously regal and foolish here as Lear, and Isaac can be transfixing when he listens, so their scene rockets the proceedings to a thrilling pitch. But, apart from Grotelueschen's Wally, the rest of the production's secondary casting works in the other direction. Crucially, the inexperienced De Niro and Birney are out of their depths as Alton and Gloria, whose B plot contains the play's tragic pivot.

I sound ungrateful, but I'm not. I never thought I would get to see a production of this play. It's tempting to believe that "Sign" was unfairly maligned by its original Broadway critics, but, truly, it was unlikely to be revived, with its references to long-forgotten Village scandals (there was an original sign in an original window) and its ungainly dramaturgy. Pretending that it's greater than it is doesn't do the play any real service; instead, a portentous production obscures those vivid Hansberrian flashes of perception. And this high-gloss, big-name treatment has flattened the part of the show that I *did* hope would work—namely, its anthropological portrait of a particular milieu in New York. I lost optimism early on in that respect, right when Brosnahan entered. Iris is a waitress, finally off her shift, and she dashes into the apartment's kitchen, where she whips off her work uniform. Underneath she's in matching white underwear and tights—everything looking fresh out of the package, since Iris is seemingly the only waitress in

history not to have dropped grape jelly on her foot. This Iris appears pristine and camera-ready, and my heart sank. Clean tights in Bohemia? It's a bad sign. ♦

By John Cassidy

By Evan Osnos

“Life of Pi” Comes to Broadway

In a stage adaptation of Yann Martel’s novel, a Bengal tiger called Richard Parker—operated by puppeteers—joins a boy named Pi, who is lost at sea, in a lifeboat.



In Lolita Chakrabarti’s stage adaptation of Yann Martel’s novel **“Life of Pi”** (previews begin March 9 at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre), a Bengal tiger called Richard Parker crowds into a lifeboat with a boy named Pi (Hiran Abeysekera), who is lost at sea. This is no run-of-the-mill apex predator: for the London show, Richard Parker’s operators won an Olivier Award for supporting actor—the first time the trophy was given collectively to seven puppeteering performers, not to mention the first time it went to a big cat.

By Rachel Aviv

By James Lasdun

By Caitlin Reid

By Ricardo Nuila

By Michael Schulman

What is theatre if not a way to transform a room into a world? In Emma Donoghue's novel **"Room,"** from 2010, a woman held prisoner for seven years protects her young son by convincing him that their tiny quarters are the only world there is, even as she plots their escape. The book became a 2015 film, for which Brie Larson won the Oscar for Best Actress. Donoghue has now adapted it for a Broadway play, directed by Cora Bissett (at the James Earl Jones, starting previews on April 3). Adrienne Warren ("Tina: The Tina Turner Musical") stars as the captive mother.

Two Broadway comedies bring fresh takes to old tales. James Ijames's **"Fat Ham,"** last year's Pulitzer Prize winner for drama, resets "Hamlet" at a back-yard barbecue in North Carolina, with a queer Black protagonist; Saheem Ali's production at the American Airlines starts on March 21. In Larissa FastHorse's satire **"The Thanksgiving Play"** (Hayes, March 25), a troupe of white theatre artists strives, clumsily, to create a socially aware Thanksgiving pageant; Rachel Chavkin ("Hadestown") directs. Speaking of theatrical endeavors gone haywire, the madcap Brits behind "The Play That Goes Wrong"—Mischief Theatre's Henry Lewis, Jonathan Sayer, and Henry Shields—return with **"Peter Pan Goes Wrong"** (Barrymore, March 17), in which an accident-prone drama society stages J. M. Barrie's chestnut.

Other Broadway plays offer star turns. Laura Linney and Jessica Hecht play Ohio women who form a bond during the Bicentennial, in David Auburn's **"Summer, 1976"** (Samuel J. Friedman, April 4), directed by Daniel Sullivan for Manhattan Theatre Club. The English actress Jodie Comer ("Killing Eve") makes her Broadway début, in Suzie Miller's drama **"Prima Facie"** (Golden, April 11), as a barrister facing a legal and moral crisis. And the sitcom star Sean Hayes plays a television staple of a bygone age, the multifaceted pianist and wit Oscar Levant, in Doug Wright's **"Good Night, Oscar"** (Belasco, April 7), set during a 1958 appearance on Jack Paar's "Tonight Show."

Musicals are fewer. **"New York, New York"** (St. James, March 24), loosely based on the 1977 Scorsese film and set in postwar New York City, features songs by John Kander and the late Fred Ebb, with additional lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and choreography and direction by Susan Stroman. **"Once Upon a One More Time"** (Marquis, May 13) revamps the stories of Snow

White, Cinderella, and other fairy-tale heroines using—what else?—the songs of Britney Spears.

Off Broadway, Michael R. Jackson, the Tony-winning writer of “A Strange Loop,” returns with **“White Girl in Danger”** (Tony Kiser, March 15), directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, in which the soap-opera town of Allwhite collides with the marginalized world of the Blackgrounds. The author Zadie Smith’s first play, **“The Wife of Willesden”** (*BAM*’s Harvey Theatre, April 1), recasts Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as a pub-dwelling Jamaican Englishwoman, played by Clare Perkins. And, in Rajiv Joseph’s **“King James”** (City Center Stage I, May 2), directed by Kenny Leon for M.T.C., two Cleveland sports fans follow the roller-coaster career of LeBron James. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

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